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MR. FORTUNE'S TRIALS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HIGHWAYMAN
THE GAMESTERS
CALL MR. FORTUNE
MR. FORTUNE'S PRACTICE
HIS SERENE HIGHNESS
KNIGHT AT ARMS

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

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MR. FORTUNE'S TRIALS

BY

H. C. BAILEY

Author of "Call Mr. Fortune,"
"Mr. Fortune's Practice," etc.

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MR. FORTUNE'S TRIALS

MR. FORTUNE'S TRIALS

TRIAL I

THE FURNISHED COTTAGE

MR. FORTUNE lay in a hammock. The fragrance of lilac and hawthorn was about him. Beyond the golden glow of his azaleas flowed the quiet, brown water of the Medway. Warm air moved drowsily, no sound came to him but the songs of birds, he saw no fellow-creature but the blurs among the strings of hops on the hill-side which were women. Mr. Fortune sighed content. Cars and people and motor-boats had driven him from his old beloved garden by the Thames. The new house had been bought for peace, and peace was found. Nothing ever troubled the smiling languor of that river-side. "Like heaven," Mr. Fortune murmured—"only quieter."

And a parlour-maid stood over him with letters. He looked and groaned. "Janet, have you no conscience?" he complained. The parlour-maid stared at him and her mouth opened a little. "No, I see you haven't. Never disturb me unless I'm really

busy." He looked with abhorrence at the letters. "Do you know my engagement-book? A red thing on the right of the desk." Janet pattered off. The letters were, as he feared, invitations. The engagement-book was brought. He turned the pages and his face fell. "Oh, my aunt!" he mourned. He found that his next day was pledged to hostesses in London. "Take the things away." He thrust book and letters into Janet's hands. "Tell Sam I shall want the car in the morning. Telephone Wimpole Street I'm coming up to-morrow. . . . Don't look so worried, Janet. It's me that's worried."

He rolled out of the hammock and wandered sadly through the garden. He was going to miss the opening of his new iris and there was no joy in life.

The next thing which happened in the case was the reception given by Lady Blanche Thurtle to see her daughter's wedding presents. Charity took Reggie Fortune there, for Lady Blanche had helped, out of her husband's millions, some of the discharged criminals on which Mr. Fortune keeps a fatherly eye. She is otherwise of no importance. Reggie found among her guests hardly a creature he knew. He wandered disconsolate through the long array of presents, trying to escape, and was brought up by a woman who took more interest in them than he did. He could not get round her, he had to look at something for civility—old silver,

Japanese figures, a gold snuff-box, some rococo jewellery, a pendant of emeralds in platinum. But the woman stood still. She was panting, she was flushed, she put her hand to her breast.

"I beg your pardon. Can I help you?" Reggie said.

She frowned at him, she shook her head. "It's nothing," she said. "It is only faintness." She turned her back on him and drew away.

Mr. Fortune, lingering a moment, looked plaintively around him and gave up the entertainment. But as he worked towards the door he was stopped by a rosy man with a good deal of collar and tie.

"Just a moment, sir. I want a word with you, please." He handed Reggie a card inscribed: "Mr. John Good, International Detective Service."

"Splendid!" said Reggie, and gave it back.

"This way, sir," said Mr. Good, and with a plump shoulder edged him away into an ante-room, shut the door, and stood in front of it. "You understand I'm in charge here? Acting for Lady Blanche Thurtle. Won't detain you a moment."

"Don't mind me," Reggie smiled.

"We don't want any fuss, do we?" Mr. Good smiled back. A faint tap came at the door. Mr. Good opened it to admit a flashy fellow with a schedule in his hand. He pointed to a line in it. They whispered together. Mr. Good turned on Reg-

gie with some ferocity. "Now look here, sir. You've been under observation. You've been behaving very odd. And there is something pretty valuable missing which was exhibited just where you were playing about. What do you say to that?"

Reggie sighed. "Who put you up to it, Mr. Good?"

"What do you mean—put me up to it? I'm acting for Lady Blanche, my lad. I've got her authority all right. I——"

"Yes, you," said Reggie wearily. "But I'm Reginald Fortune."

"What-ho!" the flashy assistant chuckled.

Mr. Good breathed heavily. "Meaning the Mr. Fortune, the Scotland Yard expert? Well, you know, I'll have to verify that."

"Then get on with it. Lady Blanche knows me."

Mr. Good looked cunning. "Pity to trouble Lady Blanche just now. There's a police station just round the corner. They'll know Mr. Fortune."

"You're wasting time," Reggie sighed.

"I don't think!" Mr. Good was more cunning than ever. "If you please, sir, we don't want any fuss, do we?"

Reggie resigned himself. In five minutes the inspector on duty at the police station was giving him a respectful welcome. "And what can we do for you, Mr. Fortune?"

"Well, you might introduce me to Mr. Good," Reggie smiled.

Mr. Good seemed to shrink. Mr. Good showed an anxiety to efface himself. "That's all right, that's quite all right, sir. Very sorry to trouble you. But I did have to verify it, you know."

"And so you shall. Just take us into a private room, inspector."

The reluctant Mr. Good was propelled onwards by the inspector. The door of a bare little den closed behind them.

"You want to make a complaint, Mr. Fortune?"

"No, it's Mr. Good who makes the complaint. He's in charge of the wedding presents at Lady Blanche Thurtle's, and he says I've been behaving suspiciously." The inspector snorted. "And one of the presents is gone. What was it that went, Mr. Good?"

"Emerald pendant, sir."

"And he thinks I've got it."

"Now, Mr. Fortune, sir, that's not right, you know. I never said you had it. I didn't make a charge at all."

"Didn't you, though!" The inspector laughed. "That was kind."

"But I'd like it cleared up," said Reggie plaintively. "Search me, please."

"Oh no, sir, not me." Mr. Good shrank. "I don't need. I'm quite satisfied."

"But I'm not. Inspector, just see if I have an emerald pendant on me."

"It's you asking him, not me!" Mr. Good cried.

The inspector, grinning, made a search. . . . Reggie gathered his possessions again.

"And that's that. No emeralds. Now, Mr. Good, who put you up to this?"

"It's not put up, sir! I don't know what you mean," Mr. Good protested. "There's a lot of stuff there and all sorts of people. Lady Blanche told me herself she didn't really know half of them. People come without invitations to these shows. And begging your pardon, Mr. Fortune, you were loitering about. When my attention was drawn to you——"

"Yes. Who drew it?"

"Well, sir, there was a young fellow came up to me and said, 'You the detective in charge? Well, I'd have a look there, if I was you,' and he pointed where you were hanging about. I knew there was some good stuff there, and you acted odd, and when we found the emeralds had gone—well, Mr. Fortune, what would you have done?"

"I should have looked after that young fellow."

"That's the game!" the inspector chuckled.

"How was I to know?" Mr. Good was plaintive.

"Would you know him again?" said Reggie.

Mr. Good pondered. "Smart young chap, clean shaven," he pronounced. The inspector made a scornful noise. "Well, you see, there wasn't anything about him. He just slid by."

"With the emeralds," said the inspector. "You'd better slide after him, Good."

And Mr. Good was not anxious to stay.

"Mr. John Good, International Detective Service!" Reggie murmured. "What's the worst you know about him?"

"He's all right, sir," said the inspector tolerantly. "No vice in him. He's only a ruddy fool. My hat, he's made a nice mess for us to clear up! His young chap got clear off with those stones. Did you have any notion about it yourself, Mr. Fortune?"

"No. No. It's not much in my way," said Reggie sadly.

But the inspector was wrong. No one got away with the emerald pendant. When all the guests were gone Mr. Good found it on the floor.

In a day or two Reggie made a call on the chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. He was received with a cry of joy. The Hon. Sidney Lomas pranced round the table holding out his arms.

"Reginald! My innocent child! Embrace me! I thank Heaven for your deliverance. Not a stain upon your character, they tell me. Wonderful!"

"You know all about it, do you?" said Mr. Fortune morosely.

"These little things will get about," Lomas chuckled. "I wish I'd seen you at the police station. The fair young hero, falsely accused, defying calumny. 'Where are my emeralds?' says the villain hoarsely. 'Search me,' the noble youth cried, 'search me, varlet!' And his innocence was proved in the fair light of Heaven."

"Yes. I wasn't taking any risks," said Mr. Fortune. "You see, I'd had the beastly things in my pocket."

The face of Lomas changed like an actor's from mirth to gravity. "The devil you had! And what have you been up to, Fortune?"

"I wish I knew. I was stuck in that show behind a woman who was having a spasm of the heart. When we moved on I thought I felt something at my coat-tails. I found that emerald pendant in my pocket. I dropped the beastly thing under the table and looked about for anybody suspicious. All very ordinary people. And then Mr. John Good, of the International Detective Service, was arresting me. Queer sensation, Lomas. Ever tried it?"

"Nobody has arrested me yet," said the chief of the Criminal Investigation Department modestly.

"Oh, don't despair. Well now, there's one or two little questions. What about our Mr. Good? It did

occur to me Mr. Good might have been bribed to get me into a mess."

Lomas shook his head. "He wouldn't take it on. We know all about Good. He's a bustling ass, but he don't touch shady jobs. No; I should say there was a jewel thief at work who saw Good watching him and slipped the stuff into your pocket."

"Good wasn't watching anybody. He said he looked at me because somebody told him to."

"I dare say. Probably the chap who lifted the emeralds. Some of these fellows play a very bold game." Lomas chuckled. "Some of 'em have a sense of humour, too! I'm afraid you don't see the joke, Fortune."

"We are not amused," said Reggie gloomily. "Suppose I hadn't got rid of those emeralds. Suppose they'd been found on me. What would you you have said, Lomas?"

"Oh, my dear fellow! You'd have told your story. We should have said the thief put them in your pocket. If Good was fool enough to make a charge we should have got it dismissed."

"Yes. And the next time I was called as an expert witness I should have been cross-examined about these emeralds and the jury wouldn't trust a word I said about anything. Good Lord, you'd never dare put me in the box if there had been a charge like this against me. This little busi-

ness would have made an end of Mr. Fortune."

Lomas frowned. "You mean somebody wants to get you out of the way. Do you suspect anyone?"

"Well, I must have made a few enemies in my time. And more than I know."

"Most of 'em have been hanged," said Lomas grimly. "I don't think the criminal population go to Lady Blanche Thurtle's. Did you see any face you knew?"

"No criminals. No criminal name on her list. But what's that amount to? I didn't know a quarter of the people. Nor did she.

"Old Mr. Parvenu gave a great ball
And of all the fine guests he knew no one at all.

Hang it, your theory is there was a crook in the place."

"Yes, but the professional crook don't bear a grudge against Mr. Fortune. We don't worry you with vulgar stealing."

"No. No. And I shouldn't have thought the beggars who hate me would play about to get me charged with theft. Their idea would be something with boiling oil in it."

Lomas laughed. "Well, I shouldn't lose sleep about that."

"I don't," said Mr. Fortune. "Good-bye, old thing. I don't like London. Too difficult for my gentle mind."

And he returned to his house of brown stone by the brown Medway and spent genial days in bringing his roses up by hand and rested from his labours in a canoe upon the lonely river; and Elise the cook and Janet the parlour-maid watched over him tenderly.

It was a lazy June evening. Mr. Fortune dined in flannels. He sat before an empty plate and watched the remains of the maraschino ice melt about the strawberries. Mr. Fortune sighed.

"I am a coward, Janet," he said sadly and Janet almost dropped the coffee tray. "I always know when I've had enough."

In a gentle melancholy he took his cigar into the garden and as usual the river tempted him. He sank upon the cushions of the canoe.

The western sky above the woods still glowed, but the freshness of night was on the air. The steers in the lush pastures by the river came rustling to drink. The voices of men crossing a wooden bridge to the village inn died away. Mr. Fortune coaxed his canoe along in the slack water under the high bank from which the hops rose in a network of green. On that side by the bridge stood an old cottage. As he came near a man ran out, saw him, checked and hailed him.

"Hallo! I say, do you know where I can get a doctor?"

Mr. Fortune groaned. "I'm a doctor," he confessed. "What's the matter?"

"My mother's had an accident—a fall—I can't stop the bleeding. I say, would you mind? Awfully good of you." Mr. Fortune swept the canoe into the bank and tied up to an old alder root. "Thanks most awfully. I'm afraid she's rather badly hurt. And we're all alone in the place. Only use it for week-ends. Haven't got a servant." He hurried on, talking fast. "Lucky to get you. . . . Mother, I've got a doctor. . . . Come in, sir."

Mr. Fortune came into a low, dark room. The man stood aside.

"Here you are."

Mr. Fortune was thrust forward; fell; fell. He was on his face on rough stone. There was a slamming thud overhead. He scrambled to his feet and found himself in a cellar.

Faint light came into it through an iron grating at one end. He made his way there. The bars were built into the stone walls of the cottage. He peered about him and, his eyes growing used to the gloom, saw an old and broken stair leading up to the trap-door through which he had been thrown. The cellar was a big place, dug out in the sandstone under the whole of the cottage; empty but for a chair and a jug on it.

He climbed the rickety stair and thrust at the trap-

door. It held fast and when he tried to use more force the stair cracked under him. He waited listening. He was aware of movement and a pungent smell.

"Oh, my aunt," he muttered.

And then a woman's voice spoke. "Good-bye, Mr. Reginald Fortune," it said, and it gave a queer panting laugh.

"Good-bye, Fortune," the man said. "Just off to sink your canoe."

"Good-bye, Mr. Fortune," the woman said again. "There's water for you down there. It's hot weather, isn't it? You'll soon be thirsty. But don't drink it till you get bored. It has quite a lot of strychnine in it. Good-bye."

He heard a door shut and locked. He heard a car started. It whirred away and was gone. The cellar felt very quiet.

Mr. Fortune sat down on the sandstone and considered things. He knew the cottage. It belonged to a painter. It had been to let furnished. It stood alone at the end of a lane which served no other house. The nearest was half a mile away. Even if he could shout loud enough for the sound to come out of the cellar there was no one to hear. And shouting would make him thirsty.

He would not be missed that night. His servants did not wait up for him. In the morning when

they found he had not come home there would be a search. They knew he had gone out in the canoe. The canoe would be found sunk. The river would be dragged. A day's work—several days' work—while he lay in the cellar with a jug of poisoned water to drink.

Lomas would sit up and take notice. Lomas would put good men on the job. They might pick up something. They might think of trying the empty cottage. But how soon? How long could he last without water? How long hold out against the temptation of that poisoned jug?

"Oh Peter! I'm thirsty already," he muttered.

Perhaps the old woman was only trying to frighten him. Perhaps the water wasn't really poisoned. He put the tip of a finger into it and touched his tongue. Bitter! Yes, the old woman told the truth. Strychnine, and a good dose of it. And he would be sitting there, wild with thirst, looking at her poisoned water. . . . The old woman must have thought a good deal about making him suffer.

"Yes. I don't think I want to amuse her," said Mr. Fortune.

Better simplify things. Better not wait till the cursed water was tempting. Spill it all and be done with it.

But with his hand on the jug he stopped. "Regi-

nald, you're getting rattled," he rebuked himself. "You're funking."

He examined his resources. Some cigars, a box of matches, a small penknife. He rose and wandered about the cellar. The beams and the planks above were oak. Against them, against the heavy trap-door his little knife could do nothing. He tried the bars of the grating. They were firm, and even if he had broken them the hole was far too small for escape.

He sat down on the floor and broke up the chair. When he had a pile of wood, he cut some into chips, working fast. He carried his pile to the grating, pushed the chips through into the garden and upon them the wood. He struck a match and looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He lit his pile, coaxed it into a fire and fed it carefully. It did not burn well, for it lay in a tangle of bushes, but it made of them volumes of white smoke.

In a little while, through the crackle and hissing of the fire, he heard heavy footsteps and voices. Then he put his head to the grating and shouted into the smoke.

"Well, now, if that ben't a queer thing!" he heard a voice thick with beer. "'Tis right against the old cottage wall."

Reggie shouted again. "Help! Help! Get me out!"

"Did you hear that, Bert? Come from underground, like. Where be you, mate?"

"Down in the cellar. Shut in the cellar. Break into the cottage and get me out."

"However did you go to get yourself shut down there? What be doing with a fire? Who be you, my lad?"

"Mr. Fortune from Southleigh. Break into the cottage and lift the cellar trap."

"'Tis the London gentleman from Southleigh, Bert. However did you get down there, sir?"

"The people locked up the place while I was down here."

"Well, now! Lucky for you we saw your fire as we was a-coming home from alehouse."

"Wasn't it lucky?" said Reggie fuming. "But I wonder if I'm ever coming out?"

"Oh, us'll have you out quick!"

At last they were spurred to action. A window crashed. A heavy body came down on the floor. The trap-door was raised, and Reggie, carrying his jug, came carefully up the broken steps.

"Bolted you down, sir!" his deliverer said curiously.

"So they did. Some mistake." Reggie smiled.

"I didn't know as there was any folks in the old cottage."

"Didn't you? Well, thanks very much." Money

passed. With some difficulty he got rid of those helpful Kentish men. They suffered from curiosity.

Mr. Fortune coming home by the road entered through the front door.

Janet, the parlour-maid, ran out into the hall at the sound and saw him with a jug in his hand. She stared. She was bewildered.

"Only me, Janet," said Mr. Fortune, and came to the telephone.

Janet's large eyes gazed at the jug. "I thought you went out on the river," she stammered.

Mr. Fortune contemplated her agitation with paternal interest. "So I did." He switched the telephone through to the study, took his jug there and sat down to make a trunk call.

He was never an early riser. He was still in his pyjamas, and was shaving, when a large car drew up at the brown house. Four men got out of it. Reggie smiled. "Turned out the whole Force," he murmured.

A tap came at his dressing-room door. "The Hon. Sidney Lomas, sir." Janet's voice was faint with awe.

"Let 'em all come," said Mr. Fortune, and wiped his face.

The next moment Lomas was with him, gripping both his hands. "My dear fellow! Thank God you're safe! I should never have forgiven myself

if anything had happened. After that affair with the wedding presents I shouldn't have let you come down here alone."

Behind Lomas filed into the room the solid form of Superintendent Bell, Inspector Mordan, dark and gaunt, and a comely youth unknown to Mr. Fortune.

"Well, well! All the talents," said he. "This is very flatterin'." He perched on the window-sill, for chairs were scarce. "So you think it was the people behind the wedding-present stunt who put me in the cellar? Yes. That was rather my idea."

"You always thought the wedding-present business was serious," Lomas nodded. "I ought to have looked after you. Thank God you've come through. We'll take no more risks, Reginald. Now, let's get on. Have you got any theories?"

"Well, somebody's out for my blood. It's revenge, I suppose."

"That's it, sir," Bell nodded. "Some fellow you brought to justice is after you. Or his pals."

"I can't think of anyone I've convicted who has got out of prison lately."

"No. I looked into that," Lomas said. "There's no one. And the fellows you convict don't generally get out of prison."

"They have friends, though," Bell persisted. "This is revenge all right."

"Yes. Rather subtle revenge. Did you notice, they're not so keen to kill me plain. They could have done that last night. A knife in the back in that dark cottage, a shot—and I should have gone out. But that wasn't good enough. First they tried to ruin me. Then they lock me up with a jug of poisoned water. I had to suffer before I died."

"Diabolical," said Lomas.

"Hate," Reggie shrugged. "Somebody's feeling very bitter against me."

"And that somebody's a pal of one of the fellows you've convicted, sir," said Bell.

"That's all right," Inspector Mordan glowered. "But if we've got to work through all the pals of all the fellows Mr. Fortune's hanged, it's going to be a long job."

Bell was watching his Mr. Fortune's grave face, with reverence. "Anyone you're thinking of, sir?" he said softly.

"I fancy the woman last night was the woman with a bad heart who got in my way at the wedding-present show."

"I suppose the heart attack was faked?" Lomas said.

"No. I don't think it was faked. Middle-aged woman, looking older than her years, good deal of grey hair, ordinary height, stout, mottled complexion, brown eyes, cultivated voice, disease of the

muscle of the heart. She uses nitrite of amyl for it. I smelt the stuff. With her a young man, average size, dark hair and complexion, rather dressy, brown tweeds with a sprig of heather in his buttonhole."

Inspector Mordan smiled. "Not much in that, sir, is there?"

"Well, I don't know. I'm sorry. It's all I've got," Reggie murmured apologetically. "Oh, I think it was a small car they went off in."

"Well, somebody may have seen the car," Lomas said. "There's that. Somebody may have met the people. Somebody must know who took the cottage. That's what you have to work on, Bell. If you want more men, let me know. I'll see the Chief Constable at Maidstone on my way back to town. Now, look here, Fortune, old man, I'm leaving you Sergeant Underwood"—he thrust forward the comely youth who smiled shyly. "He's your new secretary. And he's not going to let you out of his sight."

"But that's very embarrassin'," said Mr. Fortune. "I'm just going to have my bath."

Under the care of Sergeant Underwood, who was firm with him but not fussy, he resumed his tranquil life, and Superintendent Bell and Inspector Mordan scorned delights and lived laborious days trying to trace the lady with heart disease, and her assistant. They billeted themselves in a modest lodging in

Maidstone. It was not their desire to attract attention or to advertise that the Criminal Investigation Department was anxious about the safety of Mr. Fortune. They found the country people deeply interested in the affair, and telling the tale with picturesque decorations, but anxious for more information, not able to give any.

Observe the two of them arriving unobtrusively on push-bicycles at Mr. Fortune's gate in the gloaming. On the other side of the house, on the veranda, Mr. Fortune lay in a long chair with his first cigar after dinner. Sergeant Underwood sat by him, studying a treatise on wireless. Sergeant Underwood cocked his head, rose silently, and stood in front of Mr. Fortune, a hand in the pocket of his dinner-jacket.

Mr. Fortune chuckled. "Don't be hasty, my child. I know that step." From the sunken Dutch garden arose the square shape of Superintendent Bell, with Inspector Mordan's length in support. "Enter first conspirator and second conspirator!" Mr. Fortune smiled. "Hallo, Bell! You look worried. Another little drink wouldn't do you any harm. Fill the cup that clears to-day of past regrets and future fears. Speak your minds."

"Mine's water," said Inspector Mordan gloomily. "Plain water! Nothing else while working, thank you."

"What a life, what a life!" Reggie murmured. But Bell allowed himself to taste Mr. Fortune's 1870 brandy. "You know, sir, it's one of those cases that look so easy till you get at 'em." Bell began to open his heart. "Find the people that rented the cottage. Well, any fellow ought to be able to do that, you might say. But it isn't such a soft job. The place wasn't taken through any agents, but direct from the owner. He's up in his London studio. He advertised it to let furnished. A young woman—Mrs. John Smith by name, if you please—said she'd take it for a couple of months, and paid in advance, so he didn't bother about a reference. He don't remember anything about her looks; pleasant, he says, and quite the lady, but he's pretty sure she was young. Well, that don't help us. You'd think some of the country people must have seen folks at the cottage. We can't find anybody who ever noticed 'em. You'd think the car might have caught somebody's eye. There is talk of a grey two-seater being seen in the lane some time, but no one can say when, and there's quite a lot of grey two-seaters on the road."

"I'm afraid you're having a lot of trouble, Bell," said Reggie pensively.

"It isn't the trouble, sir; it's not getting anywhere."

"Very well managed business," Reggie mur-

mured. "Just see that no one's about, Underwood."

Sergeant Underwood wandered about behind them and Bell went on:

"Oh, they're smart enough. I don't mind owning, sir, I don't like to think of them dodging clear of us now."

"You mean they'll try for me again?" Reggie smiled. "It's only too likely, Bell. So bad for the Department."

"I'm not thinking about the Department, sir. I'm thinking about you. This last time was as near as no matter."

"Yes; I don't want them to try again," Reggie agreed.

"But there it is, sir," Bell insisted. "We've got nowhere. It looked as if we had a lot to go on, and it's all fizzled out."

"I don't know what you mean—a lot!" Inspector Mordan broke in. "We had nothing, my way of thinking. Find an old woman with heart disease, and a young chap with a bit of heather in his buttonhole and a grey two-seater! Might as well ask us to look for a woman with two eyes and a nose, and a boy in trousers!"

"No, I wouldn't say that, Mordan," Reggie murmured. "I wouldn't say that. There are points."

"Are there, sir? Well, I don't see 'em!" Mor-

dan was peevish. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us what you'd do, Mr. Fortune?"

Reggie stirred in his chair. "We'll have to go through with it," he said. "Well, Mordan, I should go to all the chemists in Tunbridge Wells. I should ask 'em if, within the last month or two, they've been selling to any new customers nitrite of amyl—or nitro-glycerine."

"Nitro-glycerine? That's dynamite, isn't it?" Mordan cried. "Why, sir, do you think they're using explosives?"

Reggie shook his head. "You've got such an imagination, Mordan. No; no bombs. Nitro-glycerine helps the heart along. But I dare say she only uses nitrite of amyl. Well, if there's a newcomer in Tunbridge Wells who's using the stuff, and has a young man and a grey two-seater, I'll see what I can do about it."

"It beats me!" said Mordan angrily. "If you knew all that, sir, why didn't you tell us before?"

"My dear fellow! Oh, my dear fellow, I did tell you! I said the lady had a heart, probably used nitrite of amyl, and the boy wore heather."

"And where's Tunbridge Wells in that, Mr. Fortune?"

"Where the heather grows. The nearest place to here where there's any heather is the hills beyond Tunbridge Wells, Crowborough way. Of course,

he may have got it somewhere else. They may have had a long run in that car, but if they did, he wouldn't be stoppin' to pick heather. Most likely they work from a base somewhere near. And most likely he picks his little flowers near home. I should try Tunbridge Wells."

"That's pretty neat, Mr. Fortune," Bell said reverently.

"If they ever were at Tunbridge Wells, they'll be off by now," Mordan grumbled. "We're a day or two after the fair."

"You think so?" Reggie sighed. "I don't think they're done with me yet. And I don't think they're afraid of me, or you either, Mordan."

Inspector Mordan glared. "Rather upset you, haven't they, sir?" he said. "They'll be afraid, all right, if we can get hold of 'em!"

"I wonder?" Reggie said.

Days passed. Sergeant Underwood learnt much about begonias and something of the white wines of France. And one afternoon a hired car rattled up to the house with Superintendent Bell. He found Reggie among his roses exhorting a gardener. Reggie's eyebrows went up. The superintendent nodded. Reggie took his arm and walked him away.

"I think we've got 'em, sir!" Bell said. "Living in a furnished house in Tunbridge Wells as bold as brass. It all fits. Mother and son. Came there

two months ago. Woman takes nitrite of amyl. Son drives a grey two-seater. They look like you said. She's oldish, both dark, he's dressy."

"Did you know them at all?"

Bell shook his head. "Strangers to me. Decent people to look at. You'll have to come over and identify."

"You haven't frightened 'em?"

"Oh, no! They don't know they're watched. And if they did, they wouldn't get away. Mordan's got plenty of men."

"What do they call themselves?"

"Weir." He started. Reggie's hands had closed on his arm. "Why, sir, it didn't mean anything to me."

"Don't you remember? It's fifteen years back. Down in the Cotswolds. Claude Weir!"

Bell pondered. "Oh, yes. Artist, wasn't he? He was hanged for murdering a woman."

"Yes—I hanged him," Reggie said, and he shivered.

Bell stared at him. "And this is his wife and his son? That would explain it all. But they wouldn't use their own name, sir."

"She would," said Reggie.

"God bless my soul! Well, sir, I'd like to get on with it. You'd better come and have a look at them."

"Yes. I'll have to see them," Reggie said slowly. "But I want to go over the records first." He turned to Sergeant Underwood, discreet in the background. "Tell Sam I want the car at once. I'm going to town. You'll stay here."

Sergeant Underwood hesitated, lingered. "Beg pardon, sir. My orders are never to leave you alone."

"That's all right. The superintendent's coming with me. I want a man here who knows the place. Keep your eyes open."

Next morning Mr. Fortune's car drove into Tunbridge Wells and checked a moment as it turned off the main road. Inspector Mordan strolled to the door.

"The boy's out in the town walking—the old woman's in."

The car rolled on and climbed and came between limes and chestnuts to houses half hidden in their leaves, grey old-fashioned houses. Reggie Fortune got out and rang at a door. An aged maid opened it. "Please tell Mrs. Weir that Mr. Reginald Fortune has come to see her." He was shown into a drawing-room which looked as if it had not been used since 1860. There was movement overhead, slow heavy steps on the stairs.

A woman came in, stood still in front of the closed door and looked at him. She was as big as

he. An Indian shawl, crimson and gold, was drawn about her body. It made her head seem colourless, that full, sallow face, the pile of grey hair fixed like metal. He saw her dark eyes. She was the woman of the wedding presents.

"So you have come to me, Mr. Fortune," she said.

"You made it necessary, madame."

"What have you done with my son?"

"Nothing yet. I came first to you."

"That was best." Her hands moved under her shawl.

Reggie sprang at her, gripped her arms at the elbows. She gave a faint cry. A revolver fell out of her shawl, and he kicked it away and let her go.

"Please sit down, madame."

"You coward!" she gasped.

"No, I don't think so," Reggie said gravely. "But it's best as it is. There are half a dozen men outside who know that I am with you. If you were to kill me there would be no escape now."

"I said you were a coward. Do you know who I am?"

Reggie bowed. "The wife of Claude Weir, madame."

"Claude Weir's widow, Mr. Fortune. You hanged him!" Her breath came quick. "Ah, you dare not deny it to me!"

"And you've waited all these years to kill me?"

She laughed. "Did you think I should forget, Mr. Fortune? I had to wait. I couldn't be sure alone. I had to teach the children what they had to do."

"Yes. I thought so," Reggie murmured. "God help us all! So you've brought up your children to murder me. And then?"

"You murdered their father. They're alive to punish you. Ah, you'll live happy now, won't you, you coward!"

Reggie's voice was gentle. "I'm not afraid, Mrs. Weir," he said. "I know too much. But you—the police are outside your house now."

"Yes, you've escaped now," she cried. "Oh, you're cunning, you're cunning. You escaped before. You're safe for a while. But what can you do? You'll send us all to prison. Very likely I shall die in prison. I can't live long anywhere. But you can't hang us. We haven't killed you. And the children will come out of prison and try again and again."

"You've trained them to spend their lives on killing me? My God, were they born for that?"

"Yes and yes and yes!" she cried. "That frightens you, doesn't it?"

"I'm thinking of them," said Reggie slowly.

"You!" she laughed. "You swore their father's life away!"

"You've told them that. You didn't tell them everything, Mrs. Weir."

She was startled into a moment's silence. "It's not true!" she said fiercely. "They've read it all!"

"Yes. And what you didn't say at the trial—have you told them that?"

She stared at him.

"I said nothing. The lawyers wouldn't let me."

"They were wise."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember? Fifteen years ago Caroline Power was found dead on the railway line at the entry of the Cotswold tunnel. But she had been killed before the train ran over her. Her head had been battered by blows with a stick; there were marks of a man's hand on her cloak; the blows had been struck by a left-handed man; there were splinters of oak in the wound. Claude Weir was left-handed; Claude Weir's hands were in the shape of the marks; Claude Weir had an oak stick from which splinters had gone; and which was stained with blood. That was my evidence."

"It was all a lie! She was killed by a train!"

"Why should I tell lies? I had never heard of Claude Weir or you or Caroline Power. I was only there to find out the truth and see that justice was done."

"It was your evidence that hanged Claude. The lawyers said so. Everyone said so. Justice! You were paid to find somebody to hang. You wanted to find somebody to hang. That's how you make your living. That's how you are famous."

"No. I'm on the side of those who are wronged. I'm for the weak." She laughed at him. "That's why I'm here now. You've tried to ruin me. You've tried to kill me. And now the police are at your door. Why should I bother to argue with you?"

"It's no use," she said.

"For me,"—Reggie shrugged—"I can protect myself, Mrs. Weir. For you—I don't know. I'm thinking of your children." She was silent. She breathed quick. "Go back to the beginning. You'd been married to Claude Weir some years. You'd been poor. Then your father died and left you his money. It was after that Caroline Power came to live near you. Why did she come? No, you never knew that. But she was very friendly with Claude Weir."

"Don't say a word against my husband! I won't listen!"

"Is it you that's afraid of the truth? On the day Caroline Power died she had asked you to tea. She sent a message in the afternoon that she was not well, and you didn't go. Why did she send that message?" Reggie took out a bulky pocketbook and

chose from it an old letter. "You know Claude Weir's handwriting. Read this."

The dead man had written to Caroline Power on the morning of the murder:

"DEAR CARLO,—Keep the old girl over the tea cups till after dark. Then we shan't be long.—CLAUDIUS."

His widow puzzled over each word. "Carlo! He called her Carlo!" she said faintly. "And me——" Her sallow face flushed. Then she cried out: "You didn't show this at the trial."

"It was hard enough for you and the children. We didn't want to hurt you any more. Now—there are the children still. You see, Claude Weir meant you to walk home in the dark from Caroline Power's cottage. And then—then something was to happen. But Caroline Power wouldn't let you come to her house at all. She went out in the dark herself on that road across the railway. Where Claude Weir expected you he found her."

"Why should she?"

"Can't you guess?" Reggie said gently. "She must have gone to meet him. To tell him that she couldn't bear him to murder you."

"Murder me? Oh, this is horrible! He—he loved me!"

"Why did he want you sent by that lonely road in

the dark where he killed her? Do you remember the grey cloak she was wearing? It was like one of yours."

"I don't believe it!" she cried. "Claude never killed her!"

"Did you ever see Claude Weir after he was convicted?"

"Ah, you are torturing me!" She held her breast.

"You want your children to know the truth," Reggie said sadly.

"I never saw him again!" She sank on a couch, trembling. "They told me he didn't want to see me. He was broken by the shame of it. You—you broke his heart!"

"No. His heart wasn't broken," Reggie said. "He wouldn't see you. Just before he died he wrote something. He said it was to be sent to you. We didn't send it. We wanted to save you from this. Now you have to know." He gave her a sheet of paper bearing official stamps and signatures, but most of it was covered by Claude Weir's writing.

"I want this sent to the woman who calls herself my wife, Millicent Weir. She has been the ruin of me, and she has got to know it. The fool keeps writing to me saying she knows I am innocent. So I am. I did kill Caroline, but I never meant to kill her. The woman I meant to kill was Millicent.

Caroline came along the lane in her cursed grey cloak, and I had her down and dying before I found she was my Carlo. That is what I want Millicent to know when I am gone. She has done for me, she and her father, who would not give us a penny of his to live on till he went to the devil and left his money behind. That was all the use I had for Millicent, and I want her to know it. When the money came to her at last, I set about getting rid of her. I should have done it safe enough, in spite of that clever devil Fortune. But when I saw it was my Carlo there on the ground, I lost my head. I meant to put the body down on the rails and make sure the trains cut it up. But I couldn't do it with Carlo. I dropped her on the line and ran off, and the next day I had to come back to dear Millicent. That was hell. There isn't any other hell. That is what I want Millicent to know. The last dying speech and confession of me,

"Claude Weir."

The woman on the couch gasped out: "He was mad! Oh, he was mad!"

"No, I don't think so," Reggie said gently. "He was speaking out of his heart."

"Oh, how cruel! Why does he say I called myself his wife?"

"We only found that out after he was dead. He

was married to Caroline Power." Reggie laid on her lap the marriage certificate.

"Before"—her hands shook so that she could not read it—"before he married me! Then I——"

"We kept it from you while we could," Reggie said. "But that man mustn't spoil the lives of your children."

"The children!" she gasped. She caught at her heart, she was bent with pain and panting.

Reggie laid her down on the couch. "Your medicine! The nitrite of amyl. Where is it?"

She fumbled at her dress. He helped her, the pungent smell filled the room. . . . The spasm of pain passed, she lay faint and still.

"There is peace now," he said gently.

"Peace? Oh, peace!"

"Peace for them," Reggie said. "And for you in them."

She lay silent while he gathered up the papers. She watched him, fear in her eyes and wonder.

There was some talking outside the windows, Superintendent Bell's voice and another voice that Reggie knew. It was asking whose car that was. . . . Mr. Fortune's car. . . . Reginald Fortune's? Where was he, then . . . with Mrs. Weir.

There was a laugh, a hurry of feet, and Bell's voice, decisive: "If you're going to them, I go with

you, my lad!" . . . Into the room, his right arm firmly gripped in Bell's hand, broke the young man of the cottage.

"What do you want with my mother?" he cried. "It's me you've got to settle with!"

"Malcolm! Malcolm!" She started up from the couch and held out her hands to him. "I've been wrong. It's all a horrible, wicked thing! I made you do it. My dear, don't be angry. I didn't know. We must forget it all. Forget everything!"

"Forget!" the lad cried. He strode upon Reggie. "What have you been telling her? You know who I am. I'm Claude Weir's son. You know what I've got against you!"

"You have nothing against me, Mr. Weir. Before he died your father confessed that he killed Caroline Power."

"It's a lie!"

"No, no!" His mother tottered to him. "Don't, Malcolm, don't! I've seen the confession he wrote. It's—it's wicked! You don't want to read it, my dear. He doesn't have to read it, does he, Mr. Fortune?"

"He did murder her?" the lad cried. "You read his confession? Oh, mother!" She drew him into her feeble arms.

"I'm sorry, dear, I'm so sorry!" she sobbed.

"It's over now," Reggie said gently. "You've got

to live. Good-bye!" He laid his hand on the boy's shoulder a moment. "Good-bye!"

He stood outside the grey house with Superintendent Bell, looked back at it, and muttered, "God help them! God help us all!"

"Yes, sir! But what are we going to do?"

"Do?" Reggie stared. "Oh Lord, I've done enough! Nothing, man, nothing! It's finished!"

"But what am I to tell Mr. Lomas?"

"I told Mr. Lomas last night. Tell him—tell him what you saw in that room!"

His car carried Mr. Fortune away to the house by the river. Sergeant Underwood opened the door. "What have you got to tell me?" Reggie smiled wearily. "Nothing? Good! Just tell Janet I want her. In the study."

Janet brought a pale face. "It's all over, Janet," Reggie said. "You'd better go home to your mother." And there was silence while she looked at him and fought to be calm.

"Ah, you know!" she cried. "You know about me!"

"Yes. Some time ago, my child."

"Oh, I can't bear it! I thought you knew after you came back from that horrible cottage alive. Mr. Fortune, it was me took that cottage. I told them about your going on the river at night."

"I know. It was what you were here for."

"What are you going to do with us?"

"I've just come back from your mother. I've shown her your father's confession that he murdered Caroline Power."

"Father did it!" she cried. "Mother knows that now? She believes it?"

"She knows there isn't any doubt at all."

"Ah!" She thrust back her hair. "I feel as if I was mad! And we—we've been trying—we tortured you in that awful cottage! What are you going to do with us?"

"Nothing, my dear!" Reggie said.

She stared at him with wild eyes. "Nothing?" she said, in a faint, wondering voice. "You—oh, you're a good man!"

"Oh lord, no! Not me!" said Reggie Fortune sadly.

TRIAL II

THE YOUNG GOD

THE front of Brighton flowered in June sunshine. Conspicuously jaunty among that flippant crowd tripped the Hon. Sidney Lomas, chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. By the lawns he was stopped. His adviser on the medical and other problems of crime stood in his way.

"Are you up already?" Mr. Fortune inquired. "How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour!" He put his hands behind his back and surveyed Lomas with reverent admiration. "Well, well. It took a long time but it's very beautiful." For the hat and the suit and the socks and the shoes and the playful tie were a melody on the theme of brown sherry. "You look like something that's left on the stage when the chorus goes."

"If you will rise at dawn and dress like a curate on holiday, of course you feel lonely."

"I never feel lonely," said Mr. Fortune with indignation. "I am hungry. Hence this bitterness. As for my clothes"—he looked down complacently

at the black tie and the dark grey flannel which draped his solid form—"my nature is respectable."

"You are getting fat," Lomas agreed. "But what's the use? While you keep that choir-boy's complexion no one will take you seriously."

The cherubic face of Mr. Fortune smiled.

"That's your corrupt mind. All simple souls believe in me."

"Hence your success with juries, Reginald."

Reggie Fortune shuddered and turned away. It was understood that no word of shop must be spoken at Brighton. Both men's nerves had been frayed in the struggle to convict the reluctant alderman of the murder of the inspector of taxes. You remember that popular but ugly case? They had vowed that a long week-end should be free of any thought of crime.

Lomas let his eyeglass fall. "Sorry. Absolutely no excuse," he said, and took Reggie's arm. "Can aught atone?"

"I was thinking of that Sauterne for lunch," said Reggie.

They made their way slowly through the Sunday crowd, impeded by opulence expanding itself and women displaying for their admirers what Art can do for Nature.

"The world is too much with us," Lomas said. "It is like being in a musical comedy, Reginald. We

are the crowded chorus. Rather gaudy, rather noisy we are. No wonder chorus girls look bored."

"We're a musical comedy and the audience jumbled together. I feel like somebody in the dress-circle, Lomas. So innocent and humble."

"There's somebody who knows he isn't."

Reggie Fortune looked at the man, a magnificent creature towering out of the crowd with shoulders worthy of his height and a sunburnt, aquiline face. He had a cluster of admirers round him, women and men. The passing crowd sent many a glance at him. He was well aware of it.

"Worship him, don't they?" Lomas chuckled. "One of England's gods."

"He's a noble young god," said Reggie. "It makes you feel alive to look at him. I saw him score his try in the last international. Took the ball off the feet of the Scottish forwards and cut right through. And we all went mad. Very uplifting, Lomas, old thing."

"Oh, a splendid animal," Lomas agreed. "The big blond beast in perfection. These be your gods, O Israel."

For this young man was Douglas Charlbury, centre three-quarter for England and the most dashing bat in the merry Sandshire team, and his portrait and his praises were in all the newspapers.

After lunch Reggie Fortune discovered that

Sandshire were to play Sussex next day and was joyful.

"Lomas, old thing, we will go watch the young god sport. If he don't bat, he'll be fielding, which is almost as good. The music of motion. Full orchestra."

But it was not to be. When Reggie propped up his paper against the coffee-pot on Monday morning he saw a headline: "Sir Rodney Trale Missing." It appeared that Sir Rodney, who lived on the South Downs, had not been seen since Friday night, and his family wanted news of him. Reggie sighed. For Sir Rodney Trale was the uncle of Douglas Charlbury. It was not likely that the nephew would be playing cricket for anyone till the uncle was found.

Reggie finished his lonely breakfast—Lomas was invisible before noon—and wandered out. When he came back to the hotel he saw a lank back which turned to show him a gaunt, dark face, that grinned.

"Mordan?" Reggie groaned. "Go away, Mordan.

"Good morning, sir," said Inspector Mordan briskly. "Lucky I found you. Mr. Lomas in, sir?"

"Don't be so hearty, Mordan, I can't bear it. Mr. Lomas is in bed. Or in his bath."

"I'll have to see him, sir." The inspector came affectionately close and murmured, "Looks like a big thing, Mr. Fortune."

Reggie groaned again and led him to the lift. They found Lomas sitting in front of his dressing-table perfecting that work of art, the wave in his hair.

"Very sorry, sir," said Inspector Mordan to the reproachful face which looked out of the mirror. "It's the Trale case. They've found the body and called us in."

"What the devil is the Trale case?" asked Lomas peevishly.

And Inspector Mordan told him at length.

Sir Rodney Trale lived with his sister and his niece in the ancient house of Chantries, which stands in a park under the Downs. Sir Rodney, who was a great man on the Turf, had his training stables close by. On Friday evening he walked across the park to dine with his trainer. He ate that dinner, they talked horses, and he left the house about half-past ten.

"That's what the trainer says," Lomas murmured.

"Just so, sir," Inspector Mordan nodded. "Well, after that, Sir Rodney vanished. No one was sitting up for him. On Saturday morning his valet found that his bed hadn't been slept in. The family rang up the trainer. They looked about for him. On Saturday evening they called in the police."

"They didn't hurry," Lomas murmured.

Inspector Mordan sniffed. "No, sir. He was

rather a dark horse, was Sir Rodney. They might have thought he had some little game on. Police search began yesterday. This morning they got to dragging the lake in the park and they found him." He turned his beady eyes on Reginald. "That looks natural enough, as you might say. Gentleman after dinner tumbles into his lake. But the chief constable has phoned us to take it up and bring an expert. It's quite providential your being down here already, Mr. Fortune."

"Providential!" Reggie gasped. "No, Mordan, you have not a nice mind."

They packed themselves into a car and drove away up the valley where the turbid Adur winds under the buttresses of the chalk and on through the ancient peace of Steyning, till the steep northern scarp of the Downs rose above them and they came upon great trees and the wide, misty green spaces of the Weald.

The park of Chantries is a pleasant place of little hills and little cliffs clothed in ancient velvet turf. The house of Chantries is mellow red brick of the time when Wren was playing with Hampton Court.

Mr. Fortune shook his head at it. "Elegant, isn't it?" he murmured. "And rather paltry. Same like you and me, Lomas. An insult to the everlasting hills."

"Don't be romantic, Fortune. A little realism is

what we need," Lomas chuckled. "There wasn't anything elegant about Rodney Trale."

At the door they were met by a bluff military chief constable, who said it was a bad business, and he was devilish glad to see them. They came into a hall hung with family portraits and Reggie drifted from one to the other, while the chief constable told Lomas that he had nothing to tell him.

"We've got the body and that's all we've got. I hope your man can make something of it. I've got Trale's own doctor here, but he's no good at this sort of thing."

"Fortune!" Lomas called, and Reggie turned reluctantly from the portrait of a seventeenth-century Douglas Charlbury, the bold, aquiline face of the young god of football and cricket looking out of a periwig.

"Very vigorous and persistent family," Reggie murmured.

"Trale blood always comes out, sir," said the chief constable. "Strong stock. Well, you'll want to see Sir Rodney."

"That is one factor in the problem," said Reggie dreamily.

Sir Rodney's doctor was a pleasant old fellow. He received the great Mr. Fortune with the homage an anxious father would give to a capable son come to take trouble off his hands.

"A terrible affair, Mr. Fortune. I fear there must have been foul play. I shall be so relieved to have you take the case. You see——"

And Sir Rodney was not pleasant to see. He lay in his sodden evening clothes, a bulky man of sixty. His face was bruised in ugly colours, his lip was cut and swollen, and, thus injured, the fierce aquiline features had a look of horrible malignity. Reggie bent over him. Reggie's hands went to his eyes . . . to his mouth. . . .

And after a long while:

"Well, well. What did you make of it, doctor?" said Reggie.

"I—I'm very much afraid those injuries were inflicted before death, Mr. Fortune."

"Yes, yes. There was a fight and then he was drowned. And rather a curious fight. Yes, that's all he can tell us."

The old doctor gave a sigh of relief. "That is death by drowning, then."

"Yes,"—Reggie gazed at him—"yes. He died because he couldn't get out of the water. But why couldn't he get out of the water? And how did he get in?"

"Really, Mr. Fortune, I have no idea!" the old doctor cried.

"He had though," said Reggie, looking at the rage on the dead face, and the old doctor shuddered.

When they left that room two people came out of another, a young woman, short and frail, an old woman, even smaller, who leaned heavily on her arm. White hair and the wrinkles of ill-health in the elder could not disguise how like they were in delicacy of feature and in the gentle simplicity of their dark eyes.

"Dr. Turner"—the young woman spoke—"can you tell us anything?" And Reggie Fortune liked her soft voice.

"I am most distressed, Miss Charlbury. I'm afraid I must tell you—your poor uncle—there must have been foul play. Mr. Fortune—oh, Miss Trale, Miss Charlbury, this is Mr. Reginald Fortune, the great authority on these cases——" Mr. Fortune made his bow. The two gentle faces looked at him with cold curiosity. "Mr. Fortune has formed the opinion that Sir Rodney was—was murdered."

"Oh!" said Miss Charlbury.

"No, I wouldn't say that," Reggie murmured. "I didn't say it. What I have said is that Sir Rodney met with violence before his death."

"Is there any difference?" said Miss Charlbury.

"Oh, Joyce! Oh, my dear!" Miss Trale wept.

"It's very good of you to help us, Mr. Fortune," said Miss Charlbury, and led her aunt away.

Downstairs Lomas and the chief constable were

closeted together in a little library, more like an office, turning over many papers.

"Well, Fortune, what about it?" Lomas cried.

"The man was drowned. Before drowning he was knocked about with fists by a rather hefty fellow. And somehow he got something poked into his right eye, something thin and narrow and sharp."

"That didn't kill him?"

"Oh, no. But it must have hurt. He might have lost the sight of the eye if he had lived. Nothing worse."

"How did he get stabbed in the eye if the other fellow was using fists?"

"Lomas dear, I wasn't the referee. Nor am I a clairvoyant. He might have fallen on a spike—a splinter—a stump."

"But you can swear it was a fellow with a punch that hit him?"

"A very hefty fellow with a powerful left," said Mr. Fortune.

"That's murder," said the chief constable, and lay back in his chair and looked with horror at Lomas. "What a terrible thing for the family!"

"They're rather a curious family," Reggie murmured.

"My dear sir!" the chief constable cried, "one of the best in the county."

Lomas, who was again turning over papers, passed him one. It became clear to Reggie Fortune that he could be more use somewhere else. He drifted away. The family portraits in the hall again attracted him. The pattern of face and body which Sir Rodney Trale and his nephew both possessed was plainly hereditary. Big, fair, aquiline, high-coloured, the men of the family had been like that for centuries. But another strain showed itself. Many of the daughters of the house were of the dark, frail, gentle beauty which had come down to Miss Trale and Miss Charlbury.

Reggie turned to find the family doctor behind him. The old man had been up to see Miss Trale. She had felt the shock sadly, and her health had never been good. Reggie said something civil.

"Poor dear lady!" the old man sighed. "Her brother to go first and like this! She was devoted to him. How often that happens, Mr. Fortune! Weak women give their lives up to watch over strong men."

"Yes. Yes. This is a curious family, doctor. All the men are big and strong and most of the women weak."

"Very true," the old doctor sighed. "Splendid fellows, the Trale men. Have you ever seen Douglas Charlbury? His mother was a Trale, of course. He is Miss Joyce's brother. Curious how different

they are. Poor dear Joyce! Between her uncle and her brother"—he pulled up short—"ah, Mr. Fortune, it's these weak women who save men's bodies and souls."

It occurred to Mr. Fortune that they had not saved Sir Rodney's body, and he lacked confidence about the dead man's soul. But he did not say so. The old doctor bustled off, and Mr. Fortune wandered out into the park.

He proposed to go down to the trainer's house and see what might be seen on the path by which Sir Rodney had walked his last walk. But he was diverted by the garden from business, which is one of his bad habits, and so he came into the park by a walk between noble yew hedges in which hollows were cut for stone seats. Where the rolling turf of the park opened before him he saw something glitter on the ground and picked up a little piece of greenish-brown quartz carved into the likeness of a face—a face with a queer, long nose. He frowned at it and looked about him. As he stood he was hidden from the park, but the path was not far away, and when he walked on he saw the lake gleam in the sunshine.

To the lake he went. The path came close to it, where the bank overhung the green water in a little white cliff. There, whether he fell or was thrown, it was probable Sir Rodney had gone in. And the

water was deep there. It would not have been easy to get out again in the dark up that slippery chalk, and Sir Rodney had been battered, dazed, perhaps, or stunned, before he went in.

The grass was trampled and grey. That must have been done by the men dragging the lake. Reggie could make nothing of it, but as he moved to and fro he saw a scrap of something whiter than the chalky grass. It was a chip of bone or ivory. It went into his pocket-book with the quartz face as he heard steps behind him.

"Well, sir, not much here, is there?" said Inspector Mordan. "They've stamped out anything there was."

"Is this where they found him?"

"Out there. In ten feet of water. Not far from the bank. He couldn't swim, they say."

"I dare say he didn't feel much like swimming."

"What, sir, was he dead before he was in the water?"

"No, no. He went in alive. But he'd been badly hammered."

"My oath, he had!" Inspector Mordan grinned. "I've found that out, Mr. Fortune. This way, sir." He led on down the path. "See, there's blood. And big footprints there in the damp stuff. That's him, or somebody his size. Now, look here, sir." By a spinney two or three hundred yards farther on the

inspector stopped and pointed. The turf was torn and broken by deep footmarks and there were scattered stains of blood. "What do you make of that, Mr. Fortune?" The inspector was triumphant. "That's a fight all right."

"Two big men rather violent," Reggie murmured. "Anything else, Mordan?"

The inspector smiled. In the long grass at the edge of the spinney were the prints of large feet.

"There was only one man in it, Mr. Fortune. He stood there and smoked a cigarette." Inspector Mordan held out the stump of it. "He could see Sir Rodney coming a long way off, and when the old man came he went for him."

"And he was a big fellow and he smokes Aristides cigarettes," Reggie murmured. "Yes. You have it all, Mordan. Except one thing. How did Sir Rodney get drowned?"

"The fellow may have knocked him out and thrown him in the lake."

Reggie measured the distance with his eye. It was some quarter of a mile. "Hefty throw," he murmured.

"Of course he'd have to carry the body to the bank," the inspector explained angrily. "Or Sir Rodney may have run him off and the fellow came after him and finished him. Or Sir R. may have tumbled in."

"Yes. Yes. There's lots of ways it could have happened. None of 'em what you'd call likely."

"All the same it did happen, Mr. Fortune."

"And that's what's most unlikely. Well, well. Now we want a big fellow who smokes Aristides cigarettes. He ought to throw some light on it."

"I should say so," said Inspector Mordan. "Coming up to the house, sir? I must see Mr. Lomas."

But Reggie let him go and wandered hither and thither in the park and out of it. He found nothing, but in the lane where a small car had stopped, another Aristides cigarette.

When he came back to the house Sir Rodney's trainer, Captain Ferne, was reporting himself to Lomas and the chief constable. Captain Ferne, who possessed the physique and face of a jockey, had nothing to say and kept saying so. He had bidden good night to Sir Rodney on his doorstep at half-past ten on Friday night and had never seen him again. Sir Rodney was quite sober. There was no one about. Did he know of anyone who had a grudge against Sir Rodney? A successful owner of racehorses always had enemies, and Sir Rodney had been very successful.

"So I have heard," said Lomas dryly.

But the trainer knew of nobody in the district, no one who was likely to be violent, could not suggest anyone.

Then Douglas Charlbury strode in, brusque and imperious. "Mr. Lomas? Which is Mr. Lomas? I'm told you want to see me, sir."

"I hoped to have seen you before, Mr. Charlbury."

"I am playing for Sandshire, sir. We have been in the field all day."

"Really?" Lomas put up his eyeglass. "Your uncle was found dead this morning."

"So I have heard, but I don't understand why you want me."

"There is evidence that he was murdered, Mr. Charlbury."

"What evidence?"

"He was assaulted before he was drowned."

"Where?"

"Here, in the park, on his way home from Captain Ferne's house."

Douglas Charlbury exchanged a glance with Captain Ferne, which was not affectionate. "Who did it? Any evidence about that?"

"Can you help us, Mr. Charlbury?"

"I haven't been living here for over a year. I was on tour with the Sandshire eleven."

"You have no suspicion of anyone?"

Douglas Charlbury gave an angry laugh. "My uncle wasn't altogether popular. Ferne knows that."

"I don't know what you mean!" cried Captain Ferne.

Again Douglas Charlbury laughed. "If Ferne can't tell you, no one can."

"Really?" said Lomas. "I must own you disappoint me, Mr. Charlbury."

"I don't know what you expected," said Douglas Charlbury. "Anything more, sir? I want to see my people."

Lomas shook his head, and Charlbury strode out.

"I'm afraid they were on bad terms, sir." Captain Ferne shook his head. "Very sad. Sir Rodney felt it."

"Really?" said Lomas, and got rid of Captain Ferne too.

"He's rather like a weasel, you know," Reggie murmured. "What's between them, the weasel and our young god? An angry young god it is."

"Young brute!" said Lomas. "It's an ugly business, Fortune."

"Yes. Yes. A curious family," said Mr. Fortune.

The chief constable shook his head.

"I fear so. Only too true, sir. A most distressing case."

"Quite," said Lomas briskly. "Well, Fortune, you went round with Mordan, didn't you? Do you agree?"

"Mordan touches the spot as ever. A large fellow

lurked by the spinney smoking an Aristides and set about Sir Rodney. Yes, we have no objections."

"Anything to add?"

"Well, there was another Aristides smoked in the lane where a small car stopped. That might have a bearing. Also there was this by the lake"—he displayed his fragment of ivory—"and that by the garden hedge." He produced the quartz face.

"Asiatic, eh?" said Lomas. "Chinese, is it?"

'Lomas dear, you shouldn't say things like that. It exposes the department. Not Asiatic. The other side of the world. American. Say Honduras or Yucatan. A work of the Maya culture."

Lomas said with some satisfaction that he had never heard of the Mayas "What's the other trinket? A Babylonian toothpick? Or a bit of Cleopatra's paper-knife?"

"I don't know. But I'm not proud of it, Lomas."

"Whatever the things are, they may have been in the park for weeks. The bit of glass"—here Reggie groaned—"wasn't near the crime; and if you know why anybody uses a scrap of bone to punch a man's head and drown him, I don't."

"There's such a lot of things I don't know. That's why I'm humble," said Reggie sadly. "Is there anything you do know, Lomas? What was in those papers you were browsing on?"

"Douglas Charlbury had a violent quarrel with

Sir Rodney. It began with a racing dispute—that fishy affair in the Rutlandshire."

The chief constable sighed and shook his head. "Sir Rodney was getting a bad name on the turf."

"There isn't a bad name Douglas didn't call him. And it got to threats, Fortune."

"Well, well! And then a large man who knew Sir Rodney's habits comes and hammers him."

"Something for your young god to explain, isn't it?"

"But he did. He had an alibi."

"Yes, they often have." Lomas smiled. "We shall see."

But they did not see at the inquest. For the caution of Lomas decided to offer no more than the medical evidence, and the verdict was murder against persons unknown.

It was afterwards that Reggie was called to Scotland Yard and found with Lomas Mr. Montague Finchampstead, the Public Prosecutor, that large and florid man. "Why do you look so happy, Finch?" he asked anxiously. "It flurries me."

"Finchampstead hopes to take action in the Trale murder," Lomas explained.

"Zeal, all zeal," Reggie murmured.

"I think it will probably be my duty, Fortune," said Mr. Finchampstead. "I have therefore called a consultation. On the facts brought before me I

consider there is a strong case against Douglas Charlbury. I do not of course wish to charge him with murder unless I can be reasonably sure of a conviction." Here Lomas yawned. "I shall be glad of your opinion on that."

"You're not a moral man, Finch," said Reggie sadly. "You want to know if you can convict him. You ought to want to know if he did it!"

"I see no difference," Finchampstead rebuked him with dignity. "I consider the matter as a lawyer."

"That's what I complain of," Reggie murmured.

"Be good enough to consider the case. Douglas Charlbury had quarrelled with his uncle about the way Sir Rodney conducted his racing affairs. Sir Rodney's horse should have won the Rutlandshire handicap, and it was not placed and Charlbury lost money——"

"Like the rest of the world," said Lomas. "The old man was a blackguard."

"Quite possible," Finchampstead swept on. "There were other cases. Charlbury wrote furious letters. He suspected his uncle of arranging that the favourite should not win the Leeds Cup, and we have a letter in which he declares violently that he will interfere. That was written three days before the murder. On Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday Charlbury was playing cricket at Southampton. The

match finished at noon. The rest of the team went on to Brighton by train. Charlbury had with him a small two-seater car. He left Southampton in the afternoon alone. He and his car were seen in the road near Chantries that evening. We have a tramp who will swear that he saw a small car like Charlbury's deserted in the lane by the park that night. We found traces of that car, large footprints, and the stump of Aristides cigarettes. We know Charlbury smokes that brand. We know that Sir Rodney was attacked by someone familiar with his habits. I understand you are prepared to testify that Sir Rodney's injuries were inflicted by a man of great physical strength. The cumulative force of this evidence is very strong. I shall be glad to hear if you have any doubt that it proves Charlbury guilty of the murder."

"Proves?" Reggie Fortune searched for a cigar and bit it. "What is proof? We don't often get it, do we? Too many unknown quantities in the calculation, Finch. But we've hanged men on weaker cases!"

"In fact, you have no doubt yourself that Charlbury is guilty?"

"I don't know," Reggie said slowly. "Have you thought about the unknown quantities, Finch? My quartz face, my bit of ivory? They don't fit with Charlbury?"

"They don't fit with anything," Lomas grumbled.

"I consider them irrelevant," said Finchampstead. "There is no reason to connect them with the crime at all. I should not produce them in the case."

"Well, well," Reggie sighed. "It's a wonderful thing, the legal mind. You'll have to produce me, Finch. And I shall have to say there was a punctured wound in the man's right eye, which could not have been made by a fist. That's rather relevant."

"You said yourself that he might have fallen on a stump, or a splinter, or a spike.

"Yes. But we didn't find spike, or splinter, or stump."

"What does it matter? It is a trivial injury. You say so. And the assault was violent. Come, Fortune, have you any real doubt Charlbury was the murderer?"

"Oh, lord, yes! Some. I don't like the case, Finch. I can't satisfy myself. And you don't satisfy me."

"Do you advise me not to bring Charlbury into court?"

"If I were on the jury—would I convict?" Reggie said slowly. "I don't know, Finch. I don't know."

"It will be a doosed unpopular prosecution," Lomas grumbled. "The shady old uncle who robbed the public rigging races is done in, and you put in

the dock this handsome nephew who's a god on cricket and footer grounds. Damn it, Finch, you'll be hooted in court."

"I am aware it will be unpopular," said Finchampstead. "That is another reason for pressing the case. I will let you know my decision." He went out in majesty.

"Well-meaning man," Reggie murmured. "Does it all for the best. We are for it, Lomas. And confound him, I can't say he's wrong."

Lomas at least was right. The prosecution was most unpopular. All England and the newspapers rallied round Douglas Charlbury. His portraits and the stories of his tries and his centuries were everywhere, and demonstrated to the satisfaction of all nice people that he was an innocent hero foully wronged. Yet a brutal bench of magistrates committed him for trial. His counsel was content to say nonchalantly that Mr. Charlbury preferred to reserve his defence, but had a perfect answer to the charge. And the opinion of the junior bar was that he would want all the answer he had got. The carefully marshalled evidence for the Crown was impressive.

When the case was tried before little Justice Golding, cross-examination made a hole or two in the prosecution. The tramp who swore to seeing a car in the lane became a vague and unconvincing tramp.

Inspector Mordan could not swear that the footprints in the long grass would fit Douglas Charlbury's feet, and confessed that they were not precise footprints. Inspector Mordan admitted that many people smoked Aristides cigarettes. Inspector Mordan could not explain how the body came from the scene of the fight to the lake. Mr. Fortune, unshaken, unshakeable upon his evidence that the injuries were inflicted before death by a strong man's fists, declined to offer any theory of the wound in the eye.

"Not such an injury as you would expect in a fight, Mr. Fortune? No. You don't know how it happened? No. In fact you don't know how Sir Rodney met his death?"

"Yes. I know he was drowned after he had been hit."

"But you don't know how he was drowned?"

"I don't know," Mr. Fortune agreed gravely. "I don't know."

Counsel turned to the jury.

"He doesn't know! The Crown's own expert doesn't know, gentlemen! And a man is charged with murder!"

There was a murmur in court. The junior bar looked at each other, and someone said: "That's torn it!"

Little Mr. Justice Golding took snuff like a bird

pecking, put his head on one side and peered at the prisoner. Douglas Charlbury, filling the dock, made everybody else in court look commonplace, and his air of disdain for the whole affair was thought very noble by the writers of sketches of the trial.

Counsel for the defence opened his case confidently. The jury would observe that he had nothing to answer, for the Crown had not proved that a murder had been committed. But in order that no shadow of suspicion should remain on Mr. Douglas Charlbury, he would show that Mr. Charlbury did not meet and could not have met his uncle on the night that Sir Rodney was drowned.

Reggie Fortune looked at Lomas. "Nothing like an alleybi, Sammy, nothing," he murmured.

Douglas Charlbury went into the box. He swore that he had not seen Sir Rodney for many months. On the night of his death he was travelling in his own small car from Southampton to Brighton. He came by way of Chichester, Houghton Bridge, and Steyning. It was therefore possible that he had been seen on the road near Chantries. But his car had not stopped there. He had dined at the Four-in-Hand inn on the Grinstead Road, which was kept by an old servant of his father's, and spent the night there. He had been smoking with the landlord all the evening till he went to bed.

Cross-examination only drew from him a justi-

fication of the violence of his letters to Sir Rodney. He had no doubt that Sir Rodney and his trainer had arranged for their horses to lose races.

"And for you to lose money?" counsel sneered.

"Half the sportsmen in England lost money, sir."

"And you naturally resented the loss."

"I resented the foul play, sir. I resented the disgrace to my family. We have run straight for three hundred years."

"What did you mean by your threat to prevent Sir Rodney playing tricks with the favourite for the Leeds Cup?"

"I meant that I would expose him, sir."

Counsel let him go. Counsel could make nothing of the landlord of the Four-in-Hand inn, and the landlady and their daughter. They swore that Mr. Douglas had come to their house at eight and not gone out again. They were quite clear and confident.

Little Mr. Justice Golding dozed while counsel made speeches. Little Mr. Justice Golding took snuff and said the case had been put before the jury with great ability. The jury might consider that the evidence justified the prosecution in bringing the prisoner to trial. They would observe that the manner of Sir Rodney's death remained obscure. The medical expert, Mr. Fortune, a very eminent man—the little judge made believe to search for a passage

in his notes—said he didn't know. A dramatic pause. The little judge looked over his glasses at the jury. "He did not know, gentlemen," he repeated in a sepulchral voice. And if they believed the evidence for the defence, they would see that however Sir Rodney met his death, it was not at the hands of the prisoner. That evidence was not answered. They must dismiss from their minds all prejudice against Sir Rodney, and consider their verdict.

"Poor old Finch," Mr. Fortune murmured. "Well-meanin' man. Did it all for the best."

The jury were not out of court five minutes. They found Douglas Charlbury innocent. And there was a cheer and the little judge was deaf to it and took snuff and looked down his nose at the very red face of Mr. Montague Finchampstead.

"Come on, Fortune," said Lomas. "Better get away before the crowd hangs us on the lamp-posts."

But in the Press seats, a plump reporter, the "crime specialist" of the *Daily Rag,* said:

"It was old Fortune got him off. He's deep, is Fortune. I wonder what his little game is?"

In the morning the papers were fuller than ever of Douglas Charlbury. He was a champion of British sport: he had suffered gloriously to vindicate the purity of the turf: and it was obvious to every sane man that he hadn't killed his uncle, and the

officials who ordered the prosecution were fools and knaves. Thus logically the popular Press, diverging into invective against the wickedness of owners who rigged races and robbed poor backers. And what was the Jockey Club doing?

Over the telephone Mr. Fortune asked Lomas to lunch. "Can you eat, Reginald?" said Lomas. "I have no appetite. I hear a mob in Whitehall howling for my blood."

"How's Finch this morning?"

A chuckle came over the wire. "Finch has gone sick."

"So he ought to be," said Mr. Fortune. "Come along. Elise is putting on one of her best soufflés. I told her you wanted comfort."

Not till that soufflé was eaten and the two men looked at each other with the eyes of those who have enjoyed pure Art, did Mr. Fortune come to business. He peeled a nectarine, he tasted it, he sipped his Barsac.

"Do you remember the Trale case, Lomas?" he said dreamily.

"Good lord, don't be brutal," Lomas groaned. "I was happy."

"Curious family," Reggie murmured. "None of the family came to the trial, I think, Lomas."

"Miss Trale has been very ill—pneumonia."

"What happens to the old man's estate?"

"He left no will. Divided between Douglas and his sister—and Miss Trale, if she lives."

"Yes, a curious family. I wonder. Lots of unknown quantities. I wonder. Lomas, old thing, have you heard of anybody down at Chantries who has anything to do with Yucatan?"

"Good lord!" said Lomas again. "What are you thinking of now?"

"My quartz face. I wish you'd have somebody look about for a person from Yucatan."

"Damme, I should have thought you had had enough of the case. You've got one man off."

"Yes, that's on my conscience," said Reggie Fortune. "I'm not satisfied with the case, Lomas. There's more than we've found in it. Who drowned the beggar?"

"I know it's unsatisfactory, and it's been deucedly bad for the department. I can send Mordan down to see if he can hear of any connection with Central America. But it's snapping at shadows, Fortune."

"Yes, send Mordan. He snaps all right," said Reggie.

So Inspector Mordan, who was in a fierce and hungry state of mind, again took the air on the South Downs. And after a fortnight he came back with what his subordinates privately described as his tail up. His report was that he had been through

Chantries and the neighbourhood with a small tooth-comb, and found no one there who was known to have anything to do with Central America.

Lomas yawned. "Out with it, Mordan! You've got more than that! I see it in your bloodthirsty eye!"

Inspector Mordan smiled. "I have, sir! There was a man handy when Sir Rodney was murdered who had just come from Central America. And he went back there just after."

Lomas lit a cigarette. "Came over to drown Sir Rodney, I suppose?"

"That's as may be, sir!" Inspector Mordan rebuked this flippancy. "Close to Chantries there's a widow lady lives, Mrs. Stanton. She has a son, a geologist he is, who's been doing work in Central America for an oil company. Just before the murder he was staying with her. He went off on the Saturday morning—that's the day after, sir—sailed for the West Indies that afternoon and he's been out there ever since. But now they say he's coming back." Inspector Mordan smiled again. "I reckon he thinks it's all clear, now the trial's over."

"Any link between Mr. Stanton and the Trale family?"

"I couldn't make out anything particular, sir. His mamma's friendly with the ladies at Chantries. He used to go there when he was at home. Nothing

marked, as you might say. But it looks to me as if we were getting warm."

"I'll ring up Mr. Fortune," said Lomas.

Mr. Fortune, much against his will, was extracted from a hammock among the roses of his riverside garden and led by a stern parlour-maid to the telephone. "Fortune speaking," he groaned, "speaking in his sleep. You are a bad dream, Lomas. Go away."

"We've found your Central American," said Lomas. "Come and hear all about him, Reginald. Interesting but enigmatic fellow."

"I do not like you, Lomas," said Mr. Fortune sadly. "But you may dine with me. Good-bye."

So it was under the tea rambler which has heard so many tales of crime that Lomas told him of the discovery of Charles Stanton. Mr. Fortune blew smoke rings into the moonlight. "What does it come to?" he said dreamily. "Our Central American is down there before the murder. He remains abroad till the trial is over and all is peace. Then he comes back. He is a bore, but for that, alas! we cannot hang him. He bothers me."

"Well, you wanted him. And we've found him. What about it?"

Mr. Fortune sighed, "You will be logical, Lomas. Let us see Charles of Yucatan. Let us talk to him!"

The chief of the Criminal Investigation Depart-

ment wrote to Mr. Charles Stanton and asked him to call. A lean, brown man presented himself to Lomas and Mr. Fortune. He had a mouth which shut tight. His manner was stiff.

"Do sit down, Mr. Stanton. Sorry to trouble you, but I hope you'll be able to help us." Lomas was at his blandest. "Now I wonder if you can tell me, do you know anything of this trinket?"

Stanton took up the quartz face and let it lie in the palm of his hand. "It's mine," he said; and showed no emotion. "A mascot of mine. The thing is a bit of Maya work I picked up in Yucatan."

"I wonder if you ever gave it to anyone?" Lomas suggested smoothly. "Or lent it to someone, perhaps."

Stanton frowned. "No, I didn't!" he said sharply. "I always carried the thing till I lost it."

"Could you tell me when that was?"

"I can't put a date to it. When I was last in England."

"Or where you lost it?"

"If I had known I should have looked for it."

"Yes, I suppose you would. Can you tell me how you lost it, Mr. Stanton?"

"I've no idea. You are asking me the deuce of a lot of questions, sir."

"So sorry you should feel that. Well, Mr. Stanton, I must ask you one more. Your quartz face

was found in the park at Chantries just after the murder of Sir Rodney Trale and close to the scene of the murder. Can you give me any explanation of that?"

Stanton stood up. "No!" he said. "I'm wasting your time, Mr. Lomas! You won't get any further!"

"Really, Mr. Stanton, you're not doing yourself justice!"

"I'm the judge of that, sir!"

"You force me to ask you another question. Why did you leave the country immediately after the murder?"

Stanton laughed. "Why don't you give me the usual warning, anything I say may be used as evidence against me?"

"I have been asking you to assist us in investigating a crime," said Lomas gravely. "Do you wish me to understand you decline?"

"I am not responsible for what you understand, sir. Good day!" And out he went.

"Deeper and deeper yet," Reggie murmured.

Lomas was using his telephone to give instructions that Mr. Stanton should be watched. "A bold fellow," he smiled. "Not really as clever as he thinks he is, Reginald. He shouldn't have said quite so much if he was going to dry up when things got awkward."

"I wonder?" Reggie murmured. "He knows something all right, but I wonder what he knows." He blinked a dreamy eye at Lomas.

"He knows Mr. Charles Stanton had a hand in the murder."

Mr. Fortune smiled. "Dear Lomas! That's what he meant you to think."

That night Lomas received a telegram from Douglas Charlbury. It was imperious. It instructed Lomas that he must be in his office next morning to receive Douglas Charlbury, who had something to say to him.

"The young god!" Mr. Fortune chuckled as he heard it read, and Lomas damned its impudence. "But what makes him want to talk? Can it be Charles, his friend? Charles wasn't talkative. Someone's sitting up and taking notice."

And Lomas said the cursed case was a nightmare.

In the morning Douglas Charlbury marched in upon them bigger than ever (so they have complained), more vigorous, more arrogant.

"Who's this?" he scowled at Reggie. "I'm here to talk to you and nobody else, Mr. Lomas."

"Mr. Fortune is my colleague. Mr. Fortune knows all about your case."

"Does he? I think not!"

"I shall not hear you except in his presence."

Douglas Charlbury laughed. "Oh, if you want

your fellows to know what an ass you've been, I don't care. Mr. Fortune, isn't it, the wonderful medical expert? You didn't cut much ice at my trial. Better try again, doctor. Now, Mr. Lomas, you've been trying to drag Charles Stanton into this murder. Well, now you listen to me. I won't have it!"

Lomas put up his eyeglass. "Did I understand you to say you—you wouldn't have it?"

"Don't put on side. You can't carry it. Yes, I said I won't have it. You can't touch Charles Stanton, and you shan't touch him. You can't do anything, that's how you stand. The case is finished."

"Because Mr. Douglas Charlbury was acquitted? I'm afraid that leaves us with a murderer at large."

"Murderer nothing! Because I was acquitted and I killed the man. You meddle with anyone else, and the first thing you know I'll tell the world."

Reggie sank deeper into his chair. Lomas stared a long minute. Then he said carefully: "Have you come here to confess you murdered your uncle?"

"No. A jury said I didn't. You can't try me again. I'm innocent. But I swear to Heaven I killed him!"

"Then you confess you committed perjury at your trial? And brought three witnesses to swear a false alibi?"

"They believed what they swore, good souls.

That's no perjury. And I—my God, I don't answer to you for what I did! You get up any dirty case against Charles Stanton, or anyone else, and I'll own it all. I've got you by the short hairs, and don't you forget it!"

He stamped out.

Lomas lay back in his chair. "Good lord!" he gasped again and again. "Good lord! That is the biggest bluff that I ever met!"

"Was it bluff?" Reggie murmured. "He meant it all."

"Did he? How can you tell? We can't call his bluff. If we had a case against Stanton and he came for the defence and swore he did the murder himself, half the jury would say he was a noble, self-sacrificing hero, and the other half wouldn't convict against his evidence. And he—he's been found innocent, and we've got nothing fresh against him but this melodramatic confession. Deuce take him, he has us beat!"

"Yes, yes. A dashing player at any game," said Reggie. "Not a nice man to have against you, Lomas, old thing."

"Sir Rodney found that out, poor devil."

"I wonder," said Reggie Fortune, "who Douglas Charlbury's playing for? Give the young god his due, he always plays for his side."

"He always plays to the gallery," Lomas growled.

"Damme, I believe he killed his uncle to get into the papers. It's a mad case, Fortune."

"No," said Reggie, "no, I don't think so. There's something we haven't got. And somebody's had some luck."

"It's not me!" Lomas laughed bitterly.

That night a letter came to Reggie Fortune. The old family doctor of Chantries wished to consult him about Miss Trale. An attack of pneumonia had left her very weak and she did not gain strength. The doctor was himself unable to suggest any treatment but rest and careful nursing.

She had expressed a very strong wish to see Mr. Fortune, and if Mr. Fortune could give the time, it would be a kindness.

In the morning Reggie Fortune lay in his car and watched the dim blue line of the Downs come clear of the mist till Chanctonbury stood sharp. He wondered whom he would meet at Chantries. He did meet the old doctor, who was all apologies for troubling the great Mr. Fortune. A simple case, he feared. An old lady exhausted by illness, he knew of nothing for her but quiet and the grace of God. But she had been very anxious Mr. Fortune should come.

Reggie nodded gravely. It appeared to him that the old doctor knew something he did not mean to say.

Joyce Charlbury came into the hall, pale and worn. Reggie found himself looking into tragic eyes. "I hope we've done right, Mr. Fortune," the girl said.

"Yes. I think so," said Reggie Fortune.

The frail bosom rose. "Be kind to her. Oh, be kind," she said faintly.

In a big room to which the sunlight came in many colours through the old uneven glass of an oriel window, Miss Trale lay in bed, a tiny shape which hardly raised the coverlet. Her face was grey as her hair.

Her nurse rose as they came, set by her bedside an ebony stick, and flitted out.

"Only Mr. Fortune," Miss Trale said.

Joyce looked at her and drew the old doctor away.

Miss Trale turned laboriously and looked at Reggie. "You know why I sent for you," she said, "I killed my brother."

Reggie sat down by the bedside and took her pulse in his hand. "I'm a doctor, not a policeman, Miss Trale," he said gently.

"I believe you mean to do right. I have tried to do right. I read what you said at Douglas's trial. Oh, if I had known! If I had known! But I was ill, and they told me nothing. My poor boy!"

"Douglas is safe."

"But now you are trying to accuse Charles Stan-

ton. It wasn't he, Mr. Fortune. He did nothing. I killed Rodney. And—and I'm glad!" She fell back panting.

"You need not fear for Mr. Stanton," Reggie said gently.

"I want you to know. I want to make sure there is nobody, nobody but me. Rodney was wicked. He played foul, he always did. But we kept it hidden till this rascal Ferne came to him. Then he began to cheat with his horses. Do you know what that meant to us, Mr. Fortune? Our colours have been on the Turf a hundred years, and he—he had his horses run crooked. A Trale of Chantries! That was why Douglas quarrelled with him. But he went on. Then Douglas heard he was playing tricks with a big race. And that night—Douglas came that night to stop him. They met down there in the park. It was he struck Douglas first, Mr. Fortune. I saw him. I was out there with my darling Joyce. Charles Stanton was coming to say good-bye to her before he went away and Rodney had forbidden her to have him in the house—oh, that was like Rodney—and while they talked beyond the garden I watched in case Rodney should come. Douglas and Rodney fought, and Douglas knocked him down and left him. And Rodney came on swearing and found me. I am lame, you know. I don't move very quickly. He said I had brought

Douglas to beat him, and he struck at me. I lifted my stick to keep him off—my ivory stick—and he broke it. I hit him in the face. I think it went into his eye. That——"

"That was what I found. I see now. That didn't kill him, Miss Trale."

"No. But he fell into the lake. And I threw the stick into the water and went away, and he was drowned. And I found Joyce and brought her back to the house. I did not tell her then. I left him. I did it. It was no one but me, Mr. Fortune. Do you understand? Do you believe me?"

"I believe you, Miss Trale," said Reggie Fortune. "I understand everything. There will be no more trouble."

"For no one?"

"Neither for you nor anyone else. It is finished."

"I—I had to do it," she said feebly. "I am not sorry, Mr. Fortune. He—he made us ashamed." She looked at Reggie Fortune, she took up the ebony stick by the bedside and tapped and the nurse came.

"You will have no more trouble, Miss Trale," Reggie said. "There is rest now, only rest. Good-bye." He bowed over her hand and turned away to meet at the door Joyce Charlbury. She drew him out.

"Is that true—what you said?" she whispered eagerly.

Reggie looked down into her dark wild eyes. "Yes. No more trouble. No more fear. It's finished."

"Ah!" She put her hand to her brow and trembled.

"Yes, you knew all the while. It's been hardest for you."

"Me?" she laughed. "Oh, Douglas had worse."

"He played the game," Reggie smiled. "You've all played the game. Good-bye, Miss Charlbury." And he went down to the hall where the old doctor was waiting for him under those family portraits of large arrogant men and frail women. "Yes. A curious family, doctor," said Mr. Fortune.

TRIAL III

THE ONLY SON

REGGIE FORTUNE had spent a long day in Mr. Justice Sparrow's court. You remember the case of the wrong false teeth. Counsel and judge had been inexhaustibly facetious. Reggie Fortune was weary of the sound of the human voice. He sought tea at that one of his clubs where everybody is learned or important. The muffins there are good.

In that cushioned mausoleum you see him recovering his respect for human nature. But even there brave men talk. Behold a venerable fellow of the Royal Society, who is believed to know more than anyone else of the way in which your breakfast becomes your brain-power, lecturing him on the first principles of the art of the "movies." This distressed Mr. Fortune. He objects to other people going outside their subjects.

Reggie Fortune ordered another muffin, and in the diversion got hold of an evening paper.

Professor Jubal continued to explain how to compose a film which would give Miss Mary Pickford a

real chance. It was necessary to do something violent. Mr. Fortune began to read the paper aloud.

" 'Gallant Channel Rescue!' I say, this is a good story. 'On the late arrival of the Calais boat at Dover this morning it transpired that the delay had been caused by an exciting adventure. Soon after leaving Calais Harbour, when the boat met rough water, one of the passengers, Mr. Wilfrid Harford, fell overboard. His companion, Mr. Ingram Langton, the well-known scientist, immediately plunged in fully dressed to rescue him. The steamer was going at full speed and a heavy sea was running, but Mr. Langton swam to his friend's side and supported him till a boat could reach them. Mr. Harford was brought on board in an exhausted condition, but is now recovering.' Good work, what?" Reggie smiled. "Ingram Langton—that's the biochemist, I suppose."

"Let me see," Professor Jubal frowned and sniffed. "Yes. Langton's always been good at getting his name in the papers. But if he ever risked his life for anybody I'll eat my hat."

He proceeded to give a character of Ingram Langton—a clever fellow, of course; rather remarkable he should have done so well working alone in that private laboratory of his; but a poor creature. . . . Quite without the scientific spirit. . . . Mixed up with business. Kept his work secret till

he could make a splash. . . . Used other men's results and gave them no credit.

Mr. Fortune listened smiling. Professor Jubal had been diverted to a subject about which he knew something—if not everything. For Reggie did not suppose that he was quite accurate about Ingram Langton. It was Reggie's experience that men of science do not always love one another. But the contrasts between the mean fellow described by the professor and the noble hero of the newspaper had a certain interest.

That was how Mr. Fortune came into the case. But he did not know it then. Unconscious of his doom, the little victim played. He spent a happy fortnight admiring his daffodils and pruning his roses, and thought of anything but Ingram Langton and Wilfrid Harford.

They remained in one of the pigeon-holes of his mind. It is the opinion of Superintendent Bell that Mr. Fortune sometimes forgives but never forgets.

Then family affection called him back to town. He had to dine with his livelier sister—the one who married the bishop. And this was the next incident in the case of the only son. The dinner was edible, the conversation mildly improving, and the port sound. Mr. Fortune found comfort in the last, and the old clergyman next him, when the ladies were gone, also approved of it. They smiled at each

other. The bishop was gently laying down the law upon confession. A theological argument developed. Reggie sighed and filled his neighbour's glass. The old clergyman listened to the bishop for a little while, then sipped his wine and turned to Reggie.

"An odd thing happened in my church last week. It's quite out of the world, you know. I found a young man in it, a stranger to me. He seemed very uncomfortable, sat down, wandered about, sat down again, and I fancied he was watching me. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him. I thought perhaps he wanted to learn something about the church—it's a very beautiful old building, Mr. Fortune. He looked at me in a curious, bewildered way and didn't answer. I talked a little about the church. He didn't seem to listen.

"Then he interrupted me to ask if I was the clergyman there. I said yes, of course. Did he want to speak to me as a clergyman? Then he said, did people confess to me. I told him I didn't hear confessions. But he seemed so distressed, I asked him if I could help him in any way. Was there something he wanted to say to a priest? He stared at me very strangely and cried out: 'I don't know. I don't know what I want to confess,' and he rushed out of the church."

The old man sipped his port. "That seemed to me very odd, Mr. Fortune. A man who wants to

confess and doesn't know what he wants to confess must be quite uncommon."

"I wonder," Reggie Fortune murmured. "What did he look like?"

"I really didn't notice. He was quite a lad. Very thin. I thought him nervous. He flushed and trembled as he spoke to me."

"Yes. Did you see his eyes?"

"I don't think I did. Now you mention it, I remember he was continually closing his eyes. The lids kept on dropping, as it were. Yet he didn't seem at all sleepy."

Reggie put down his cigar. "No, I don't think he was sleepy," he said slowly. "You've never seen him again? I wish you'd let me know if you do."

That was the second incident in the case. It did not then occur to Mr. Fortune to connect it with the first. But it worried him, and when a week had gone by without any message from the old clergyman, Mr. Fortune went down to his parish.

A church and three old houses lurk together in forest, a scrap of the forest which once covered all the country between the chalk of the North Downs and the South Downs. Some of the nobler trees are gone, and the tangles of birch scrub and bracken grow thicker, but it has changed little in a thousand years. Though motor-cars roar through it on a tarred road now, a hundred yards from the road you

can forget that men have ever meddled with it, and hear nothing uglier than a jay.

Mr. Fortune saw the little shingled spire among the budding trees and found a lane that led to it. He went into the church.

No lean young man with dropping eyelids was inside. But he lingered. It was a strange little church, dark in that spring noon, for the Saxon builders had pierced the massive walls with only a few tiny windows.

The tower was built of wood, huge oak beams fretted by the centuries. Mr. Fortune, who loves all manner of craftsmanship, was deeply interested.

"Yes. Noble old place," he murmured. "But I fancy our young friend didn't come to look at woodwork. Why did he come?"

In a corner lay an ancient chest, the trunk of an oak hollowed out and fitted with a lid. "You're a dream," said Mr. Fortune, and opened it in a pensive ecstasy. It contained cleaning-rags. "My mistake."

He wandered up the nave examining the changes which later men had made in the Saxon masonry. "Fascinating. But I don't think he was fascinated. He didn't come to study church architecture. I suppose he really did want a parson? . . . Oh, my aunt!"

He had come into the chancel. A brass in the floor bore a quaint picture of a man, and on it was

inscribed something about Robertus Harford, Armiger. Robert Harford, gentleman, had died piously in the seventeenth century.

"Harford?" Reggie frowned at it. "Now what do I know about some fellow called Harford? Yes, he fell off the Dover packet, and Langton, the biochemist, fished him out. And Jubal said it was very improbable of Langton. But this is not relevant."

He walked across to the rectory. The rector had gone to Chichester. Reggie sighed and got into his car and sought an inn. He found one all by itself at a cross-roads in the forest. The landlord was harsh with him, but mellowed under the influence of his own ale. Few are the men—or women—who will not talk to Reggie Fortune. No, they didn't get many strangers coming there. Not stopping. Running through on their motors, of course. Why would they stop? . . . He hadn't heard of any new folks coming to live thereabouts. Nowhere for 'em to live. No houses in the forest. He had heard Mr. Langton over at Newlands had folk staying with him. A young gentleman and his mother, Harford by name. But they wouldn't be like strangers. Old Sussex folk, the Harfords. There was Mr. Geoffrey Harford over at Toldwynds.

Reggie changed the subject. That landlord remembers him as a pleasant gentleman, asking a lot about butterflies and knowing about beer. A kind

of artist. Reggie left his car at the inn and went walking, an exercise he does not love.

The house of Ingram Langston was marked on the Ordnance map.

"Two miles as the crow flies," Reggie groaned. "And I don't fly. Jam for Reginald." He plodded on by wet tracks, and the sandstone was nobbly and brambles and sprouting bracken caught at his ankles. "It is borne in on me that I am a silly ass. That's the worst of having a conscience," he mourned. But he went on.

The red chimneys of Langton's house were in sight when he heard someone coughing. It was a long paroxysm, and at the end of it came the murmur of a woman's voice, anxious and tender. Then a man spoke rather shrill:

"Oh, don't fuss, mother. I'm all right, I'm perfectly all right. I haven't been coughing for weeks."

Reggie checked and waited for them. They were on a path which led down from the house beside a stream golden with kingcups. The man hurried on with quick, short steps, though he was tall. The woman caught him up and put her hand in his arm. He let it fall and drew aside.

"Go on. There isn't room to walk together," he said sharply.

He was a tall youth. A heavy coat did not conceal that he was very lean. The face which rose

above his muffler was lean, too, and flushed. He panted a little.

Reggie strode on. "I beg your pardon." He lifted his hat. "Could you tell me the way to the Wyck Arms? I seem to have lost myself."

The woman smiled. "It is confusing in the forest, isn't it?"

She was a pretty creature, young to be the mother of a man, and her smile was merry. But her eyes did not smile. "Wyck Arms, Will," she turned to her son, "which is the best way?"

He looked at Reggie, and looked away again quickly, like a naughty child. "Coming away from it, aren't you?" he muttered, and pointed with his stick.

Reggie made a little conversation about the paths, and the woman answered him amiably. But her son stood apart, slashing his stick at the bushes, and it was he whom Reggie watched. He could not keep still.

At his best pace Reggie Fortune trudged back to the inn, and as he went heard the lad coughing again. The round cherubic face of Mr. Fortune was troubled. His car took him to London at an unholy speed. Before he dined he wrote a letter to Scotland Yard, read it over with a frown and stared at it and muttered a quotation: "'Subjoineth the

Abbot Deodaet: God help all poor souls lost in the dark.' "

Some days later he sat gazing dreamily at the people and the tulips in the park. The Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department tripped along, very youthful and sprightly, his hat on one side, his coat an epigram. In the midst of a dazzling smile for the débutante of the season, he saw Mr. Fortune. He extricated himself from his admirers and pointed his stick at that solemn rosy countenance.

"You're one of the world's workers, aren't you?"

Mr. Fortune's eyebrows asked him an unspoken question. He nodded. Mr. Fortune rose and walked away with him.

The rooms of the Hon. Sidney Lomas are hung with French prints of the eighteenth century. He goes with them well. They make Reggie Fortune look a little solid, a little respectable.

Lomas perched on the cushioned fender. "Yes, I think we have it all, Reginald," he said. "But what the deuce do you want with it?"

"I don't know," Reggie mumbled. "That's why I want it."

"My dear fellow, there's quite enough crime in the world without inventing it. You needn't make work for us."

"Yes. Begin with the facts, do you mind? We'll deal with the jokes afterwards."

Lomas shook his head. "Not your usual cheery self, Reginald. A little brusque with me. A little morose. Well, the Harford family—that was your first question. The Harfords are old Sussex people. Big place near Lewes let to Isaacson, the tanner. The present head of the house is a young fellow of twenty. His father and elder brother were both killed in the War. The boy's health is not good. Lung trouble. His mother took him to Switzerland after the War, and they lived there some time. They came back this spring. It is said he isn't much better."

"Why did they come back?"

"In Switzerland they met an English doctor, Ingram Langton. Not so much a physician as a man of science, I understand. He isn't in practice; he does research work. Quite a good reputation."

"Yes. He has a bit of a name. Bio-chemistry is his line."

"Langton and Mrs. Harford became friendly. She tells her friends that he was very kind and helpful with Wilfrid. She was anxious about the boy and asked Langton to look at him. Langton said the Swiss doctors were doing no good, but he thought he could. He offered to take the boy in his house in Sussex and treat him. So the Harfords came back to England with Langton, and they've been living with him."

"Yes. Why does a bio-chemist undertake to treat a boy with lung trouble?"

"Isn't it done?" Lomas shrugged. "The man's a doctor. I don't understand the divisions of the profession."

"It's not usual. Like finding a cook doing parlour-maid."

Lomas smiled. "I should suspect the cook of being devoted to her master, Reginald. It had crossed my innocent mind that Langton liked Mrs. Harford. Not a criminal offence."

"No. She's a comely woman. What do you know about Mrs. Harford?"

"She was a beauty in her time and an heiress. Brought a lot of money with her. Blameless wife and mother. Rather shattered when her husband and the elder boy were killed. Devoted herself to the boy Wilfrid. Nobody has a word to say against her."

"And what happens to the Harford property if Wilfrid dies?"

"If Wilfrid died without making a will it would go to his mother, I suppose. She's next-of-kin and there's no entail." Lomas frowned. "You're taking it rather far, Fortune."

"Yes. Yes, I think someone is looking rather far ahead."

"Good heavens, do you mean she is planning her

son's death? Why should she? The Harford property's respectable, but she's a wealthy woman, with her own money settled on her. You're too ingenious, Reginald."

"Not me," said Mr. Fortune sadly. "There's plenty of brain work in this case. But not by the police force, Lomas, old thing. Are there any more Harfords in the world?"

"The War wiped them out. Only an old bachelor, Geoffrey Harford, some sort of cousin. He was out in India for years. Lives in Sussex now—Tunbridge Wells way."

"I know where he lives. Next door to Langton. And he's next-of-kin, is he? And it's all very odd and disturbing."

"What have you got in your head? You don't imagine this old fellow has arranged with Langton to get the Harfords down there and murder them?"

"No. I don't imagine things. I have no imagination, Lomas. But I'm uncomfortable."

"Well, what's worrying you?"

Reggie sighed and lay back and blew smoke rings. "Langton saved this boy's life. That worries me."

He told the story of the Channel boat and gazed at Lomas with large, melancholy eyes.

"What's the matter with that?" Lomas cried. "If Langton jumped into a rough sea to fish him out,

Langton isn't exactly trying to murder him. Don't you believe the story?"

"I verified it. It's quite true. That's what bothers me. Langton didn't want Wilfrid to die then. But a few weeks later Wilfrid was found in a church near Langton's house—nerves all wrong—striking symptoms of drugs—trying to confess to a parson—and he didn't know what he wanted to confess."

"Good heavens!"

"Yes. What's happening to Wilfrid in Langton's house? I went down the other day. I saw Wilfrid and mamma. Wilfrid wasn't loving her. Wilfrid's on edge. Also Wilfrid's in poor health. Asthmatic cough. But the drug symptoms were not marked. He could keep his eyes open."

Lomas stared. "What drug makes a fellow shut his eyes?"

For the first time Reggie smiled. "Lomas, dear, you don't need it. Gelsemin would do the trick. He might have been given gelsemin for his cough. But he oughtn't to have enough to make him lose control of his eyelids. And if he did it would break him all up—and he is broken."

"But what does it all come to?" Lomas protested. "You say the stuff would be good for his cough. Well, Langton prescribes it, finds the dose too big, and cuts it off. You say yourself the symptoms had stopped. All quite reasonable."

"Yes. And what did Wilfrid want to confess that he couldn't get out?"

"The boy was dazed with drugs."

"Yes. Mr. Ingram Langton, who is a bit of a blood as a chemist, takes a boy with lung trouble into his house and pours into him drugs that affect the nerve centres till he don't know where he is. Oh, quite reasonable, Lomas."

"But Langton saved his life. He can't mean the boy any harm."

"He saved Wilfrid's life a month ago. He may want to murder him to-day."

"I don't see my way," Lomas protested. "The rational explanation of your facts is that Langton took up the boy's case out of affection for the mother and hasn't handled it well. I suppose he's more of a chemist than a doctor. Very likely he has too good an opinion of himself. These experts always think they know everything." He cocked a sarcastic eye at Mr. Fortune. "Very deplorable, Reginald, but not criminal."

"My innocent boy!" said Reggie. "Never believe anybody's murdering till you have the corpse. Never see anything till it's over. Then you'll be the perfect policeman."

"And what the deuce do you see?"

"Possibility number one: Mrs. Harford wants Wilfrid killed, and Langton's doing it. Then she'll

have the estate. Possibility number two: Langton wants Wilfrid killed so he can marry Mrs. Harford and the estate. Possibility number three: Geoffrey Harford wants Wilfrid and Mrs. Harford killed so he can take the lot, and Langton's arranging it."

"And you say you've no imagination!" Lomas laughed. "Good Heaven, Fortune, you don't believe any of that, do you?"

"No. No. I've an open mind. Lots of other possibilities, Lomas, old thing. But one thing's certain—that boy's going to the devil." He started up. "Can't you feel it? The whole business is wicked. There's something—malign—behind all we know."

Lomas was impressed at last. "We have nothing to take hold of," he complained. "What can you do?"

"I can save that boy—if I have time." He bit his lip. "I want Bell, Lomas. We'll go down and reconnoitre Mr. Langton. I want to deal with this little murder before it's done. Quite a new experiment for the department."

For some days afterwards an artist was sketching in the forest near the house of Ingram Langton. The trees were in a delectable variety of colour, birch and beech lucent green, oaks breaking into yellow and crimson and orange, ash sombre still as the dark firs, and the ground beneath was flooded with

the blue of hyacinths. The artist made many sketches in many places, till there came an evening when he was joined by a sturdy man who carried the vasculum of the botanist.

"I've got on to it now, Mr. Fortune," said the botanist.

"Been makin' love to the maids, Bell?"

"It was the gardener," said Superintendent Bell. "I like men better than women in business. The old fellow we saw was Geoffrey Harford, sir. He often comes over to Langton's place. Langton don't go to him much."

"Langton's looking after his patient, of course. Very proper."

"Geoffrey Harford's coming to dine again to-night. They're cutting the first asparagus for him."

Reggie gasped. Reggie packed up his paint-box. "The blighter!" he said pensively. "And what does the gardener think of things?"

"He's not the kind of man that thinks much, sir. He says it's a lonely place, and Mr. Langton's a funny gentleman."

"Yes. I thought that, too," Reggie murmured.

"Langton's been here some years. Geoffrey Harford got the house for him. He had a laboratory built on. Very seldom had anybody to stay with him till Mrs. Harford and her son came. By the way, she's gone, sir."

"I know. And that leaves Wilfrid here alone. But he's still alive. I saw him. Seemed quite happy in his mind. Even affable. He talked to the wandering artist. Said he liked the place. Liked being here when he wasn't bothered. Now when I saw him with his mother he wasn't liking the place. He wasn't liking anything. That means, when his mother is here, he is bothered. When she was with him he wasn't drugged. To-day he was. His eyelids were flapping like wings. What do you make of that, Bell?"

"They only drug him when she isn't here?" Bell said. "Why, sir, I suppose they're afraid she'll notice it."

"I wonder," Mr. Fortune murmured.

They strode on through the forest on a track between impenetrable walls of green, till on the crest of a rise they came to a clearing and saw, far away beyond bright meadows and tilth and copse, the long mass of the Downs. In another moment they were shut in again by trees.

"Not a good country," Mr. Fortune shuddered, "not a kind country. It don't let you see."

They came to their inn, and Superintendent Bell, amazed and gratified, heard Mr. Fortune order a high tea.

"I enjoy this sort of meal, sir," said he at his third egg. "I thought you didn't care for it."

"I don't," said Reggie gloomily. "This isn't a meal, it's nourishment. And fellows like G. Harford go out to dinner. And have the first asparagus. A wicked world, Bell. Come on. Let's hear him eat."

They mounted a little two-seater, and through the gloaming made for Langton's house again. The car was run into the forest some way off and stopped. They stole up to the house. Little shafts of light between the curtains showed the dining-room window. For some time they heard nothing but a murmur of voices and service. An owl was screeching in the forest. They strained their ears in vain. Then Wilfrid Harford grew louder. He was talking of what he would do when he had his own way. The others seemed to be laughing at him. He protested that he was not tied to his mother's apron strings. He became louder and wilder, he lost his head and seemed to know that he had lost it. Then one of the quieter voices was raised, and with authority. The noisy lad was being removed.

Lights came in another room. The men outside felt their way along the wall. Wilfrid was still noisy. He seemed to be quarrelling with his companions. But the quieter voice was dominating him. Reggie could only make out a word here and there, but it was repeating something again and again.

The boy fell silent, but the quiet voice went on. It talked of "your mother," it talked of "friends" and "free."

Reggie slid along to the front door, rapped on it, and stood listening intently in the silence that followed. For it was utter silence. The quiet voice had stopped. After a moment there came to the door a man in a dinner-jacket, a large and hurried man.

"What the devil do you want?" he said.

Reggie (in a strong cockney accent and rather intoxicated) was devilishly sorry to bother him, but he had lost the jolly old Brighton road. Which was the perishing way to the Brighton road? The large man snapped out directions and slammed the door.

Reggie took Bell's arm and lurched away till they turned the hedge out of sight of the house. Then he strode on fast.

"That was Langton," Bell said.

"Yes. So the voice before wasn't Langton's voice. Therefore it was Geoffrey Harford's."

"That little quiet voice? Funny sound. Seemed to be saying the same thing over and over again."

"I know," Reggie said irritably. "Come on, man."

"Finished with it, sir?"

"What the devil can we do?" Reggie growled. "Come on. Where's that damned car?"

Superintendent Bell was surprised and pained. It is not Mr. Fortune's habit to swear.

The lamps were lit, the engine started, the car backed out to the road. But Mr. Fortune did not drive away. He sat bent over the wheel looking ahead. The lamplight clove through the dark to where the forest overhung the road in a sandstone cliff and above the little caves of gloom gnarled beech roots twisted up into the night. Superintendent Bell stirred. "Looks pretty ghastly, that," he said. "Kind of wicked."

"Ghastly?" Reggie Fortune laughed. "Ghastly it is, Bell. And I'm leaving him to it, God help me!" Just above them in a sudden rush of music a nightingale began to sing. Reggie let the car go and Superintendent Bell held fast and prepared to die. Even in daylight Reggie Fortune's driving terrifies.

It was another car, Mr. Fortune's own sedate saloon, which brought him and Bell next day to the London hotel where Mrs. Harford was staying. It was not a vagabond artist, but a man punctiliously correct, and, in spite of his round face, grave and melancholy, whom Mrs. Harford received with visible alarm.

"I have to apologize for what seems an intrusion, madame. I believe that it may be of service to you. I am sure it is necessary," said Mr. Fortune slowly, picking his words. "You have my name. I am a

medical man and the adviser in medical matters of the Criminal Investigation Department." He paused and studied her. She was much agitated. "Circumstances have drawn my attention to the condition of your son, Mr. Wilfrid Harford."

"But I remember you! Don't I remember you? You spoke to us in the wood."

"I did. I saw your son then. I have seen him since. I am certain that it is your duty to remove him from Mr. Langton's house."

She wrung her hands. "Oh, I was afraid!" she gasped.

"What are you afraid of?" said Reggie sharply.

Her eyes opened very wide. "Why, I was afraid you'd say that. But he seemed so much better at first. Mr. Langton was so kind and he really understood Wilfrid. And Wilfrid really was better."

"Mr. Langton made him better at first. Yes. What has Mr. Langton made of him now?"

"But I don't know." Her hands still worked together. "Wilfrid says he's perfectly well when I'm not there. He says it's only that I worry him." She cried. "That's—that's why I came away. It is really."

"And when you are there——?" Reggie insisted coldly.

"Oh, he seems so ill. And he's not like himself. Mr. Langton says it's just the treatment, and I

mustn't worry. He says Wilfrid can come to see me sometimes in town. But I've asked him and he won't come. Mr. Langton says he hopes to persuade him soon."

"And you do everything Mr. Langton tells you?" Reggie frowned.

"What can I do?" she sobbed. "Wilfrid won't listen to me now. It's terrible. He doesn't want me to be with him. He doesn't like me any more."

"I have a car here, Mrs. Harford. I will drive you down to Mr. Langton's house. You must see Wilfrid alone and tell him that you want him to come away with you. If there is any difficulty I will speak to Mr. Langton."

"You? Do you know him?"

"Yes, I think I know him," said Reggie Fortune.

She wrung her hands. "Oh, I should be so glad if I could get him away. But last time I saw him his cough was so bad again. And Mr. Langton says that to interrupt the treatment would be dangerous."

"It is much more dangerous to go on with it," said Reggie. "That treatment of Mr. Langton's is destroying your son."

"Destroying?" she gasped.

"That is the word," said Reggie gravely. "Come."

She looked at him a moment and ran out.

Reggie's chauffeur drove that car, Superintendent

Bell sat by him, and Reggie was behind with Mrs. Harford. She did not talk. She lay back watching the houses go by, wide-eyed and pale. It seemed to Reggie Fortune that she was not thinking, but in the grip of fear. Sedate and smooth the car ran on and (not for the first time) Reggie fretted at the majestic caution of his chauffeur. When they turned from the noisy racing of the Brighton Road into winding lanes it became still more impressive.

The shade of the forest received them, the heavy scents of it came into the car; they were climbing the hill to Langton's house when a shot rang out. Mrs. Harford gave a little cry and clasped her restless hands. Bell turned in his seat. Reggie made a furious gesture. Bell spoke to the chauffeur and the big car surged over the hill. Another shot was fired. They came to Langton's gate, and with a symphony on the horn the car swung in.

Reggie Fortune saw Langton's face peer from a window in his laboratory, and made ready to jump out; then sank back again with a sigh of relief. Across the garden came Wilfrid Harford.

Mrs. Harford was out of the car and running to him. "Oh, Wilfrid," she cried, "are you really all right?"

He jerked himself away from her. "Oh, don't fuss so!" His eyelids twitched and he shook. "Whatever have you come for?"

Reggie Fortune slid to the ground in one silent movement and stood watchful.

"Wilfrid! Oh, don't look at me like that, dear. It frightens me. I had to come. I can't bear your being alone here."

"I want to be alone," the boy snapped. "Good heavens, don't you know that yet? You'd better leave me alone."

The door of the house opened. The large form of Ingram Langton appeared. He looked keenly at the car and the solemn chauffeur and the stolid superintendent. Reggie Fortune was hidden from him by the body.

"But I can't leave you alone, my dear," Mrs. Harford was pleading. "Oh, Wilfrid, it isn't good for you to be here. I'm sure it isn't. I want you to come away with me."

"With you!" the boy snarled. "Oh, go away, for Heaven's sake, go away!" He could hardly speak plainly.

"Wilfrid! I do so want to have you with me. I came to take you away. You know this place is bad for you. I want you to come right away with me."

"That's it, is it?" he mumbled; his hand was in his pocket.

"Yes, I've seen a doctor this morning. He says I must take you away at once. Come with me, dear, and we'll go right away. Just you and me. I can't

do without you, Wilfrid." She smiled piteously. "I must get you away from these people." She put her hands on him, yearned towards him.

The boy flung himself back, plucking at his pocket. He had a revolver out as Reggie reached him and struck his arm aside. But a shot was fired and his mother reeled and fell. Langton rushed out and grappled with the boy, who should have been helpless in the big man's grip. But they swayed together, and there was another shot as Reggie caught the thin wrist and Bell tore the revolver away.

"Stand off, you!" Bell's other hand took Langton by the throat.

Wilfrid Harford staggered away from them towards his mother. His face was red with his own blood. Reggie held him up.

"Look what you've done, sir," Reggie said quietly.

Mrs. Harford, one hand on her breast, raised herself. "Oh, he didn't, Mr. Fortune," she said faintly. "It was me. I was holding him when he was playing with it. I made it go off. It's all my fault."

"Yes. That's your mother, sir," Reggie smiled at the boy.

Wilfrid cried out and tried to break from his arm; stumbled and fell.

Reggie swung on his heel. "Take charge of

Langton, Bell. He's not to leave the house. He can send for anyone he likes."

"Who the devil are you, sir?" Langton cried.

"I'm Reginald Fortune."

"And I'm Superintendent Bell, of the C.I.D. Come on!" said Bell.

"Here, Sam!" Reggie called to his chauffeur. "Get some water and clean linen out of that house." He bent over the woman.

"Oh, not me," she panted. "Wilfrid's hurt!"

But the quick light fingers were busy at her breast. "I'm thinking of him," said Reggie gently.

And in a little while mother and son were laid in the big car and driven away.

It was evening when the car hooted at the gate again and a frightened servant opened the door to Mr. Fortune. Bell sat in the hall by a window.

"Langton telephoned for Geoffrey Harford," he said in a low voice. "He came quick. They're in there. Lot of talking."

Reggie flung open the door of the library. Langton sat in a heap. Over him stood a little sallow man, whose face was loose skin in a multitude of wrinkles, the darker for his white hair.

"Yes, I thought I should find you together," said Reggie sharply. He looked about him. "Yes, this is the room where you worked on the boy when you

had him drugged. Pleasant memories about it, Mr. Harford?"

"I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance," Geoffrey Harford said primly. But his brown eyes glowed.

"Remember that voice, Bell?" said Reggie, over his shoulder. "Mr. Langton can introduce me."

Langton pulled himself together and stood up.

"It's Reginald Fortune, the Scotland Yard surgeon," he said. "I told you. He brought Mrs. Harford down."

"That was so unwise, Mr. Fortune," Geoffrey Harford said gently. "You've made yourself responsible for a very unfortunate affair."

"Yes, I was sure you'd regret it," Reggie smiled. "It hasn't gone according to plan."

"No, indeed." Geoffrey Harford's voice was softer still. "How is my poor cousin?"

"Which of them?" said Reggie.

"Ah, I think first of Muriel. But, indeed——"

"You always have, haven't you?" said Reggie Fortune, and paused a moment, looking from one man to the other. Langton wiped his lips. The sunken eyes of Geoffrey Harford burnt. "Mrs. Harford's wound is not serious. I have no doubt she will live."

Geoffrey Harford turned his back on Mr. For-

tune. Langton leaned on a chair. "What about the boy?" he said hoarsely.

"After he reached the hospital, Wilfrid was still able to speak. He did speak. As you say, a very unfortunate affair, Mr. Harford."

Geoffrey Harford swung round. His placidity was shaken, his wrinkled face twisted and twitched, his voice rose high. "What do you mean by that tone? It's insolent, sir, and brutal. It's intolerable! You've meddled with a very sad case which Dr. Langton was treating, and caused a terrible tragedy. Now you have the impudence to threaten us."

"With what?" Reggie said sharply.

"I have no idea."

"Think it out. Some time ago Mr. Langton brought here a lad suffering from bronchitis and asthma. He treated the boy with gelsemin. He used such large doses that the boy's nerves and mind were affected. From time to time he stopped the drug, brought on the cough again, and produced the irritation which comes of craving for a drug. This was done when the mother was here, so that the boy should believe her presence made him worse. While he was under the influence of the drug it was Mr. Geoffrey Harford's habit to practise hypnotic suggestion on him and introduce into his mind the idea that his mother was his enemy and that

he could only obtain freedom by killing her."

"This is a wild invention, sir," Geoffrey Harford cried.

"You've been heard," Reggie said quietly. "We heard you at night. Perhaps Mr. Langton remembers a man who knocked him up to ask the way to the Brighton road."

"You—you've been spying here?"

"Yes. You interested me some time ago, Mr. Harford. And now we have the poor boy's evidence. I told you he was able to speak for a little while. Some days ago Mr. Langton suggested to the boy that it would be amusing for him to practise revolver shooting. Mr. Langton kindly provided the revolver. (You've got it, Bell? Good.) And to-day, when his mother tried to persuade the boy to go away with her, he shot her and shot himself, which Mr. Langton, who was holding him and could break him in half, very cleverly allowed him to do. Yes. All very ingenious. But we've saved Mrs. Harford's life." He stopped, and in the silence heard Langton's breathing.

"What do you mean to do?" Langton growled.

"I shall charge you with conspiracy to murder."

"Preposterous!" Geoffrey Harford panted. "Langton saved the boy's life. He jumped overboard in mid-Channel and——"

"I know. It was in all the papers. Very con-

venient to get that in the papers. Langton saved the boy at the risk of his own life. I'm sorry." For a moment Reggie Fortune looked with some sympathy at the broken man. Langton turned away with an oath. "But it wouldn't have done for Wilfrid to die before his mother. Then the family estate would have gone to her. You thought of everything, didn't you, Mr. Harford? She had to die first so that her money came to him. And that's just what didn't happen. If only he'd killed her before he killed himself you'd have got everything. Yes, a near thing!"

"It's a lie!" Geoffrey Harford screamed. "The devil take you, it's a lie! I didn't want her foul money. I wanted her brat to kill her."

"Oh, Heaven, don't talk!" Langton groaned. "We've had enough talk. What are you going to do with us, Fortune?"

"Bell will telephone for the local police. They'll take you away." And Superintendent Bell went out to the telephone in the hall.

But Geoffrey Harford, his wrinkled face still twitching, cried out: "It wasn't her money, you fool! I didn't want her money!"

Langton laughed. "Well, you won't get it, will you? I suppose we'd better get ready, Fortune?"

"Yes. I don't know what they'll let you take."

Langton opened an inner door. "I shan't want much," he said as they went out.

Mr. Fortune walked to the window and opened it. He was standing there when Superintendent Bell came back.

"Why, sir, where are they?"

Reggie did not turn. "They've gone to get ready," he said.

"But you oughtn't to let 'em go alone."

"Oughtn't I?" Reggie murmured.

"Where did they go, sir? This way?"

Bell opened the inner door. It gave upon a passage which led him to Ingram Langton's laboratory. "This won't do, you know——" he began, then his voice went up: "Mr. Fortune!"

Reggie followed him. It was very light in the laboratory amid the shining white tiles and the shining glass. Geoffrey Harford sat at a table where a microscope stood by some porcelain dishes. Langton lay on the ground. Bell was kneeling beside him.

"My heavens, he's cold already!" he gasped. "Cold and damp!"

Reggie looked into Geoffrey Harford's face. The thin lips were blue. Reggie sniffed. In the faint mingled odours of the laboratory there was a scent of bitter almonds. He took up a beaker from the bench above Langton's body. "One of the cyanides.

Or hydrocyanic acid itself." He smelt it gingerly and wandered about looking at the bottles of reagents and drugs. "Yes. Tidy fellow. He put the bottle back. But, you see, it's just been moved. Very neat, he was."

Bell looked at Langton's livid face and shuddered. "Oh, Mr. Fortune, you shouldn't have let 'em go."

Reggie shook his head. "The best way, Bell—the best way."

"Best? Best for them, maybe." Bell rose heavily. "It was our job to bring 'em to trial."

"They've gone to trial," Reggie said.

Bell gulped. "Yes, sir, but we've got a trial on hand here. What are we going to say at the inquest?"

"I'm going to say that I came here to ask Langton to explain his suspicious treatment of a private patient of his. I found him with Harford. He didn't explain. When I spoke of calling the police he took Harford out of the room to confer together, and they didn't come back. Verdict, suicide."

"The verdict's all right," Bell agreed. "But it's a bad business."

"No. I don't think so. We shouldn't have been able to hang them."

"Why not?" Bell stared. "Why not, Mr. Fortune?"

"They hadn't killed anybody."

"Good heavens, sir, do you mean the boy's not dead?"

"No. He's not dead. I hope he's not going to die."

"But you made 'em think he was."

"Yes. I made them think so," Reggie said gravely. "They'd tortured that boy and his mother. They planned to murder mother and son. They did their best to murder the boy's soul. And the law would only have given them a few years in prison. I want justice."

Bell looked at him with dread.

"It's an awful responsibility to take."

"Yes. I take it," Reggie Fortune said.

He turned away and walked back to the library, sank into a chair, and lit a cigar and drew long draughts of smoke.

Bell still watched him nervously. "Mr. Fortune, did you notice the old fellow said he didn't do it for money?"

"Yes. Yes. I wasn't surprised. I asked her in hospital if Geoffrey had any grudge against her. She didn't know. He'd never done anything. But he wanted to marry her when she was a girl and she wouldn't have him, and took his cousin instead. While the late Colonel Harford was alive I don't think people had much chance of hurting his wife. When she was left with only this boy, Geoffrey

thought he could make her suffer. Poison her son body and soul, let her see her son kill her—something rather rich in revenges, Bell."

"The man was a fiend."

"Yes. He liked hurting. And he had ideas about it. Not a nice fellow to have loose in the world."

"I suppose Langton went into it for the money?"

"Yes. They must have worked it out together. But it was Geoffrey's scheme. I suppose he put it to Langton there was a fortune going, and Langton fell for it. I've rather wondered about Langton. He did decent things in his time. I fancy Geoffrey was a bad influence long ago. Poisoned his mind. He never got anywhere. He wouldn't do the grind. He grabbed at other men's work. A mean strain in Langton. He was greedy. Just the sort of clever fellow to sell himself to the devil."

"A weird case, sir."

"Yes. We've hanged the murderers without a murder. That's quite unusual. Very distressin' for the department."

TRIAL IV

THE HERMIT CRAB

ONCE upon a time, Mrs. Fortune, irritated by the sight of her husband lying on his back and thinking beautiful thoughts asked him if he had ever done any work in his life. Reggie Fortune replied with dignity that he would be eternally honoured among the great benefactors of humanity for his work in the case of the hermit crab; he opened his eyes and smiled. "That is, perhaps, my masterpiece, Joan," said he.

Mrs. Fortune showed him the tip of a red tongue. "Mormon!" said she.

Yet it began innocently enough. It began, as Mrs. Fortune complains, soon after they were married. The Hon. Sidney Lomas, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, came in to a lazy Sunday lunch, and contemplating Mrs. Fortune with artistic approval, congratulated Mr. Fortune on his knowledge of women.

"I haven't. I don't," Reggie Fortune protested. "I don't know anything about women. But I don't act as if I did. That is how I am wiser than all other men."

The Hon. Sidney Lomas shook his head. "These experts!" he sighed. "They never will tell you how they do the trick, will they, Mrs. Fortune? This profession of innocence is irritating, Reginald. How did you persuade her to marry you?"

"How did I, Joan?" Mr. Fortune murmured dreamily.

"I always wanted to be a mother to you, my dear," Mrs. Fortune explained to him. "And you were getting so fat."

"He was," Lomas agreed with enthusiasm. "Nay, more, he is. Are you sure that you are the right treatment for him? I think what he really needs is something sterner. I should recommend Miss Platt Robinson. Could you arrange for him to marry her, too?"

"If you think it would be for his good, Mr. Lomas," Mrs. Fortune said demurely.

"It would be for mine," Lomas sighed. "But married people are so selfish."

"Who is your lady friend, Lomas? Does she want to be a mother to you?" Mr. Fortune asked.

Lomas shuddered. "Not that! No, only a bore, not a mother. I'm afraid you haven't heard of Miss Platt Robinson, Reginald. She would be annoyed."

"Philanthropist at large, isn't she?"

"At large, unfortunately," Lomas agreed. "She is one of the earnest women who have made Eng-

land what it is, Mrs. Fortune. She has lately become Superintendent of the Records Department of the Ministry of Social Welfare."

"Poor thing!" said Mrs. Fortune.

"I gather that isn't what the women in the Records Department call her."

"Her appointment was a shameless job, wasn't it?" Fortune smiled.

"My dear Fortune! There are no jobs in the Civil Service."

"Forgive me," Reggie said meekly. "I do not understand these things."

"Miss Platt Robinson, sir, is one of those noble women who have given their lives to good works. Whenever you hear of a scheme to prevent people doing something and make them do something else, you may be sure Miss Platt Robinson is in it up to the neck. She was born to set everybody right. She had her big chance in the War, of course. She went round lecturing mothers and housewives on the joys of sacrifice. Then she looked after the manners and morals of young women in factories. And when she had won the War, some earnest, wealthy philanthropists felt that the country had to provide for Miss Platt Robinson. So she was pushed into the Records Department of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Hence these tears."

"What do they do there?" Mrs. Fortune asked.

"Lomas shook his head. "No one knows. Miles of card indexes and box files and women. A dreadful place. And Miss Platt Robinson superintends."

"Having come in over the heads of all the permanent staff," Fortune murmured. "Do birds in their little nests agree, Lomas?"

"It was feared by some miserable cynics like you that there would be trouble. Old Bligh—he's secretary to the Ministry—said it was the dirtiest work in his chief's corrupt career, and he hoped and believed the women in the Records Department would tear Miss Platt Robinson limb from limb. Some of them have been in the service thirty years. You wouldn't expect them to want an outsider put over their heads. And the woman who should have been made superintendent, Miss Thornton, has worked her way up from the bottom, and I'm told she's fit to run the Empire. They all worship her."

"They ought to have made a rebellion," said Mrs. Fortune.

"I sometimes suspect you are a man, Joan," her husband sighed. "Women are conscientious. Women have a sense of duty."

"They had," Lomas agreed. "They took Miss Platt Robinson to their bosoms. All was peace. Old Bligh was much annoyed: said it convinced him women were unfit for the public service. For months all was peace." He smiled at Mrs. For-

tune. "Woman is the most patient of the animals. I don't know how long it would take Miss Platt Robinson to get on a woman's nerves. But she has now begun to receive attention." He took from his pocket-book a small sheet of drawing-paper and gave it to Reggie. "A scene from bird life. Artist unknown."

Mr. Fortune looked at a sketch in water colour. "A young cuckoo ejecting a fledging hedge-sparrow from the maternal nest. Very neat and good."

"I'm not a bird fancier myself, but I grasped the allusion. So did Miss Platt Robinson. She calls it a threatening letter, Reginald."

"Is this the only one?"

"No. The others are not illustrated. She had one which said: 'Did you think you could get away with it? Not so, Platty.' Several of them call her Platty, or Platter. That annoys her particularly. She has had a dozen or so. None of them very long. One said her appointment was the scandal of the century. Another said: 'We must draw the line somewhere, Platty.' That's the general tone. They get more peevish as they go on. So does Miss Platt Robinson. She don't think much of Scotland Yard. She can't understand why we haven't found somebody to hang."

"Why haven't you?" Mr. Fortune murmured.

"My dear fellow, there's three hundred women in

the department. All the three hundred may be in it. My fellows tell me she's put everybody's back up. She's been meddling at large—meddled with their luncheon hours, with their catering, with their holidays. Of course, they kick!"

"I wonder," Reggie Fortune murmured. "It's not much in my way, Lomas. I like passion and gore. But there are points——" He looked affectionately at the picture of the cuckoo.

And the next morning found him at Scotland Yard. He was in time to assist at the interview between Mr. Weeley, the hoary old politician who was Minister of Social Welfare, and Lomas. Mr. Weeley came in like a lion. He was much distressed to find that the Criminal Investigation Department had done nothing to clear up this deplorable affair. He was compelled to say—many unpleasant things, and he said them at length.

"Now you've finished, sir," said Lomas placidly, "I've only to add that the staff of your ministry never gave any trouble till you appointed Miss Platt Robinson. However, if you want a criminal case over your appointment, I'll do what I can. I am laying the papers before Mr. Fortune."

"A very interestin' case," Reggie smiled.

But Mr. Weeley flinched. The name of Mr. Fortune meant murders to him. "Ah, really? Really? I am quite sure you will do everything that is pos-

sible. But the important thing is to settle the matter: to restore confidence and good feeling. We mustn't have any publicity, Mr. Lomas. I rely on you, my dear sir. Absolutely!" He went out like a lamb.

"What a nuisance politicians would be if they weren't all cowards," said Lomas. "Here are the papers, Reginald."

Mr. Fortune examined a dozen letters.

They had no resemblance except in the general style, which was mysterious and humorous. The writer or writers used paper of different kinds, though all were good; the words were in script, or printed in different inks and with different pens. The letters had been posted in different parts of London; most of them in the West End. The general sense of them was that Miss Platt Robinson ought not to be superintendent and would not be superintendent long. But there was no definite threat.

"Anything strike you, Lomas?" Mr. Fortune smiled.

"Nothing to take hold of." Lomas shrugged. "Nothing criminal. Insubordinate, of course, written to the head of the department. Not a police matter."

"I wonder," Mr. Fortune said. "You know, there isn't any malice. They're not bitter, and they

have humour. Very unusual anonymous letters. I would like to have a few words with Miss Platt Robinson."

Lomas sighed. "She'll have the words, Reginald."

They took a cab to the new gaunt building which is the home of the Records Department. They were led through long corridors of echoing concrete to the severe room, all whitewash and white paint, where on an island of carpet in the middle of a vast bare floor were the table and the chair of Miss Platt Robinson.

Pictures of Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale looked down upon her. She stood up between them, a large, plump woman in a dark coat-frock. She had an extensive face, in which the eyes and the mouth stood out, an earnest, voluble face very pleased with itself. And she began to talk. She was glad to see Mr. Lomas. She felt it extraordinary that there had been so much delay in dealing with the case. She wished to remind Mr. Lomas that she had to think not only of herself but of the women committed to her care. Attacks upon her she might afford to treat (as she did) with contempt, but it was too plain that their gross nature, their repetition, must have a deplorable influence upon the morale of the women on her staff. It was amazing to her——

"Have you told the women here all about the letters?" Lomas broke in.

Miss Platt Robinson said contemptuously that her secretary of course opened her letters.

"And you don't trust your secretary?"

"I trust everyone, Mr. Lomas. It is one of my principles. But I suppose you have some knowledge of the world. You should be aware that such things cannot be kept secret."

"If my secretary couldn't keep secrets I shouldn't keep him," Lomas said.

Miss Platt Robinson said that she was not inclined to discharge a trusted woman on a vague suspicion. She was surprised to receive such advice.

"We're not advising," said Reggie meekly. "We're asking questions. Do you suspect anyone?"

"I do not allow myself to suspect, sir. It is one of my principles."

"And very grateful and comfortin'," Mr. Fortune murmured. "But somebody painted the cuckoo. What is your theory, Miss Platt Robinson? Why did you get the bird?"

"I am convinced, sir, that we have to deal with an attempt to undermine my authority in the department."

"By whom?"

"I am not a detective, sir. It is not possible for

me to watch and investigate and obtain evidence. The case has been referred to your department, and I must leave it in your hands. I never meddle. That is one of my principles."

Mr. Fortune lay back and smiled at the picture of Joan of Arc. "Thank you so much. I do like a free hand," he murmured.

Miss Platt Robinson made an impatient noise. "But I really must point out, sir, that your handling of the affair has been deplorably feeble. The attacks are being continued. Only this morning I had an outrageous thing." She opened a drawer in her table and drew out a parcel. "Kindly examine that."

Mr. Fortune looked at the address. It was in printed letters. The parcel had been posted in West London. It was made up of a tin box, which was packed with seaweed. From this he drew forth a large whelk-shell. Out of the shell protruded the front claws of a crab.

"Good Gad!" said Lomas. "What is the meaning of that, madame?"

"I wonder how you can ask me!" Miss Platt Robinson cried.

Reggie had laid down the shell and the crab. He was poking a curious finger inside the box into the seaweed which contained little lumps of red sand and shell.

"What is the thing, Fortune?" Lomas said.

Reggie looked up. His round, cherubic face was solemn.

"What? This gentleman?" He lifted the whelk-shell. "Oh, he's *pagurus Bernhardus.* A hermit crab."

"Why should the creature be sent to me?" said Miss Platt Robinson.

"The hermit crab, madame, in the inscrutable wisdom of Providence, is given a naked and tender abdomen. He is, therefore, tempted to shelter it in other people's property. He evicts the whelk and finds a safe and comfortable situation. Here you see him."

Lomas smiled. "So this is a variation on the theme of the cuckoo."

"I fear so." Reggie shook his head. "I fear so." He put the hermit crab back into the seaweed and carefully packed it up again.

"This is positively outrageous!" said Miss Platt Robinson.

Into the room came a small brisk woman. "I think you had better read these—oh, I beg your pardon. I will bring them when you're free." She was gone again. It seemed to Reggie Fortune that the frown which Miss Platt Robinson sent after her had a certain acidity.

"Well, well," he said. "And not one of these

queer things has suggested to you any particular person who don't like you?"

The prominent eyes of Miss Platt Robinson stared at him. Miss Platt Robinson seemed to struggle with emotions. "It must be some one who has lost all sense of decency," she exploded. "Jealousy, I suppose." She burrowed among the papers on her desk.

Mr. Fortune lay back and winked at the picture of Florence Nightingale.

Miss Platt Robinson took up a strip of yellow paper and gazed at it eagerly. "I should advise you to compare that writing with the anonymous letters, sir," she said.

It was a note about the practice of the department. It was in a clear, bold hand.

"And who wrote this, madame?"

Miss Platt Robinson hesitated.

"I should prefer to leave you to draw your own conclusions, sir."

"We will," said Reggie. And he took up the box with the hermit crab. "It's a very interestin' case. Good morning!"

"Interesting!" Miss Platt Robinson gasped.

Outside in the long gaunt corridor Reggie and Lomas were submerged in a flood of young women going to lunch with earnest haste. " 'The female of the species is more dreadful than the male,' " Reggie

murmured. "Hold my hand, Lomas, I'm frightened. They look very determined. I'm not good enough to die. What an awful place this is! A labyrinth full of women. Fancy being lost here!"

They emerged at last into sunshine and the street.

"Lunch is strongly indicated," Reggie sighed relief. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

"But why are you so rattled, Reginald?"

"How can you ask? You also were present. Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore."

"The woman's a fool," said Lomas. "Some humorist's been pulling her leg, that's all there is to it."

"I wonder. Not a nice woman, Lomas. Not really a nice woman."

"Well, I don't mind owning I shouldn't like anybody to send me a dead crab in a whelk-shell. I fear I shoud be peevish."

"The hermit crab upset her, didn't it? She had suspicions all right after that. Do you know the writing she gave me as a sample?"

"Confound her," said Lomas. "It's her assistant's, Miss Thornton's. She was the little woman who blew in. She's been in the office all her life. She ought to be superintendent now if she had her rights."

"Does she think so?"

"How can she help thinking so?"

"As you say," Reggie nodded. "That writing looks—possible. The anonymous letters are disguise, of course. What's Miss Thornton's reputation?"

"One of the best. Good Gad, I hope she hasn't lost her head. It would be an infernal shame if she's ruined herself over the Platt Robinson."

"Somebody's lost her head." Reggie smiled.

"You can't tell what a woman won't do when she begins to hate another woman," Lomas pronounced. "They all run mad then, even the best of them."

"Yes. Yes. There was some nasty temper about. I wonder."

"Confound you, what do you think of it yourself?"

"I don't think. I haven't enough facts. I only wonder. Very interestin' case. I wonder what they'll be up to next."

Lomas chuckled. "It won't be easy to beat the hermit crab."

Mr. Fortune possesses the faculty of remaining awake after a large lunch. He spent the afternoon in a scientific investigation of the hermit crab, and the packing, and the tin. In the evening his wife found him benign but pensive. In the morning she heard with regret that their chauffeur and factotum, Sam, had gone to the seaside for a day or two. Mr.

Fortune offered to drive her himself. She shuddered. Reggie Fortune's driving is the triumph of mind over matter.

For some days nothing else disturbed their happiness. Mr. Fortune asking over the telephone whether Miss Platt Robinson had received any more congratulations, was told that she had gone on holiday. Sam the chauffeur came back to his job. And one morning the voice of Lomas spoke over the telephone.

"Reginald, are you there? You are quite sure you are there? You haven't eloped with Miss Platt Robinson?"

"I hadn't noticed it."

"This is very suspicious. Better come around and prove an alibi."

Sam drove Mr. Fortune to Scotland Yard.

"What is this unseemly jest, Lomas? I am a good young husband!"

"Anything you say will be used as evidence against you. Now, Reggie, where is she?"

"Oh, my aunt, is she really gone?"

"The vanishing lady. A new illusion by Miss Platt Robinson. This morning Lady Bandicot—do you know Lady Bandicot?" Reggie held up his hands. Lady Bandicot is one of our most earnest social reformers. "Quite so. She came round with her tail fluffed out and her back up. She had a meet-

ing yesterday at which Miss Platt Robinson was to make a speech on the modern woman. Miss Platt Robinson didn't turn up. The evidence is that she left her house early the day before yesterday without luggage. She didn't even say when she was coming back. She hasn't been seen since."

"Well, well," said Reggie Fortune. "And what's Lady Bandicot's view?"

"Lady Bandicot points out that never before in our fair island story did Miss Platt Robinson fail to make a speech when she had the chance. She argues that it was no small thing which stopped her from making a speech. She suggests that Miss Platt Robinson has been made away with by some wicked enemy of the rights of women, or some disgruntled female in her office."

"It is an interesting case, isn't it?" Mr. Fortune smiled. "And what does the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department make of it?"

"I think it's a case for a medical man, Reginald. I suppose the wretched woman is off her head. Lost her memory, or had a nervous breakdown. Didn't she look like it?"

"I wonder. Where did she live, Lomas?"

Miss Platt Robinson had a new house in a garden suburb. In a room where the paint and curtain glared at each other across angular furniture, which insisted that no man had ever thought of making

furniture like it before, Reggie and Lomas conferred with a grim housekeeper. Miss Platt Robinson had said nothing when she went out, but that she would not be in to lunch. She went out alone. She had no one call on her that morning. Lady Flora Norton called the day before.

Reggie, who was playing with the things on the writing-table, looked up.

"An old friend?"

Lady Flora worked under Miss Platt Robinson during the War. She was Lady Flora Holmbury then, of course. Miss Platt Robinson certainly had some letters the morning before she went out. She always had many letters. The housekeeper could not say if there were any friends she was likely to visit. She had many friends.

"Yes, yes. We'll find them in the address book here, no doubt," Reggie said. "Thanks very much. We'll ring when we've finished."

The housekeeper started at this abrupt dismissal, and went out reluctantly.

"What have you got, Reginald?" Lomas came to him.

Mr. Fortune took from the pages of the blotting book an envelope addressed in a bold hand to Miss Platt Robinson.

"Good Gad! Another Letter!" Lomas drew out a sheet on which was written "You will not be

Superintendent long." "That doesn't seem much to run away from. I suppose there was something more."

Reggie was going over the writing-table. "No, nothing more," he said. "Only that and nothing more. A very interestin' case."

"Some of these drawers are locked."

"Yes. Yes. I don't know how far you're going into Miss Platt Robinson's secrets. I want my lunch."

"I want to know how this letter came here. It didn't come by post."

"No, it didn't come by post," Reggie agreed. "Good-bye."

"Confound you, Fortune. This is serious."

"I know. That's why I'm going. I'm going to lunch with the hermit crab. Good-bye."

To his waiting chauffeur, Mr. Fortune said: "Liverpool Street!"

"Won't the car do it, sir?" Sam smiled.

"You're so romantic, Sam. I want a luncheon-car."

In the afternoon sunshine Mr. Fortune arrived upon the sea-front of Walton-on-the-Naze. The summer was still young, the beach not crowded; though the tide was high only a few bathers disturbed the glittering steel sea. Mr. Fortune walked northwards with a roving eye for them and the little

groups that took the air on the promenade. But he saw no one who detained him and when he came to the end of the promenade he strode on northward still, by the path at the edge of the tall green corn above the sea. At the point where the coast opens to make the wide inlet of Harford Water he sat down on a stone groyne and contemplated the landscape.

Only a flock of sheep grazing in the salt meadows and the gleam and call of plovers disturbed the solitude. The tide was rising still but almost full and from the groyne to the grass of the low islands the water shone grey.

"Yes. A soothin' harmony," he murmured. "I like these damsels."

And he rose lazily and went on by the path which runs above the shore between hedges of tamarisk. He saw on one of the islands white tents. When he was as near to it as he could get he came out from the tamarisk and stood by the water. From the island girls were bathing. Mr. Fortune lit a cigar and watched them with artistic approval. They had a boat out. They swam to it, dived, dark lithe shapes curving pleasantly in the sunshine with a gleam of white arms and legs. Mr. Fortune approved—and clapped.

The girl who was steering the boat turned. Another girl climbed into the bows and shaded her eyes to look. Mr. Fortune took off his hat. There was

conversation on the sea, heads bobbing up and clustering round the boat and gazing at the intrusive man. Then they vanished into the water like seals, the girl at the tiller bent down, the motor began to throb, and the boat made for Mr. Fortune.

Fifty yards from the shore the engine was stopped.

"What's your trouble?" the girl cried, and she let her boat drift in to stare at him.

"I've come to call," said Fortune.

"At home sixth Mondays," said the girl.

"But I'm sure Miss Platt Robinson would like to see me," said Mr. Fortune meekly.

"Poor you!" she smiled. She had a thin, brown face which became pugnacious when she smiled. "Come on, then!"

Mr. Fortune looked with pathos at the yards of water between him and the boat.

"Be a little man!" she exhorted him. "Nana's watching!" but she brought the boat in nearer. "Baby paddle now?"

Reggie Fortune, though plump, has agility. He ran down the bank and jumped, arriving in the bows of the rocking boat on all fours.

"You owl!" said the girl. "You nearly had her over!"

"Then it would have been my duty and my delight to save your life," Reggie smiled.

"Save your grandmother!" said the girl and started her engine.

Mr. Fortune made his way aft to her side. She was clothed in engineer's overalls, from the trousers of which little bare feet came out. She tucked them under her.

"Don't you mind me, Jonah," she said. "You look about for a whale."

The boat made for the island at the rate of ? knots.

"Do you get many whales?" Reggie smiled. "I thought you were catching crabs!"

The girl stared at him. "It's a clever little man, isn't it?" she said.

The island was near. A group of girls, some still in bathing-dresses, some in sweaters and shorts, stood on the beach watching.

"And very picturesque too!" said Mr. Fortune. "But embarrassin', you know. I never had so many ladies take an interest in me all at once."

"Feet cold?" The girl's warlike smile flashed at him. She stopped the engine, and heaved her little anchor over the gunwale. The boat brought up in shallow water.

"Who is your young man, Vi?" a clear voice hailed.

"Little Jonah looking for a whale," the girl said.

She was rolling up her trousers. "Come and paddle, ducky. Nana will hold your hand."

Mr. Fortune took off his shoes and socks.

"There's a brave man!" said she, and they splashed together to the beach.

Mr. Fortune, holding his shoes in one hand, took off his hat with the other to a cluster of smiles.

"I hope I don't intrude?" he said, and heard a camera click at him.

"Sir, the pleasure is ours," said somebody who consisted chiefly of a mop of chestnut hair.

Mr. Fortune became confidential. "Would you mind? Do introduce me to the hostess?"

The small person made a curtsy in the grand style, a work of art made piquant by her shorts and her bare knees, and rising from it showed him beneath chestnut hair a comical little face with no nose to speak of but large and dangerous eyes.

"So charming of you to give us the pleasure," she murmured in a conventional voice. "We were just going to tea." She put her hand in his arm and led him towards the tents.

Mr. Fortune's feet dragged. Mr. Fortune saw the shape of Miss Platt Robinson. Mr. Fortune gasped slightly. Not as once she sat majestic between Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc Miss Platt Robinson walked the island. That plump, im-

portant shape was clothed in a sweater and shorts. Mr. Fortune averted his eyes.

So did not she. Her prominent eyes swelled and glared from a red face. "Mr. Fortune!" she cried. "Positively outrageous!"

"Platty!" said the little creature on Mr. Fortune's arm. "Potatoes, Platty!" Two of the girls took Miss Platt Robinson and led her gently but firmly away.

Mr. Fortune was taken to the tents where two oil stoves were roaring beneath kettles and several deck-chairs stood.

"Won't you sit down?" said the little creature in her conventional voice. "Tea, children!"

"May I put on my shoes?" Reggie murmured.

"If you think you'll feel safer," she smiled.

He subsided on to the grass. He put on his shoes, he gazed at Miss Platt Robinson, who also sat on the ground but afar off with a pail between her legs, scraping a potato in a slow time—a tragic woman.

"She gave a lot of trouble!" the little creature smiled. "But I think she's beginning to grasp things."

"What things?" said Mr. Fortune anxiously.

"The great realities. If you don't work, you don't eat. Platty has to scrape the potatoes for dinner before she has her tea."

Mr. Fortune gazed at her in alarm. But a girl brought him a cup and buttered biscuits. He found himself the centre of a ring of curious and amused girls.

"Do you know all my young people?" said the little creature in her conventional voice. "Vi, Hoodlums, the Wogger, Belinda"—she reeled off a string of names and nicknames, and laughed. "And you're Daniel in the lions' den, aren't you? What's your second name, Daniel?"

"I am called Fortune," said Reggie meekly.

"The Scotland Yard man?" she cried. "Oh, good work!"

"Yes. Yes, I am rather proud of it myself," Reggie murmured.

There were emotions among the sweaters. Someone pointed a finger at the slim, dark girl of the boat. "You've done it now, Vi. This is your fatal weakness for policemen."

"He's better here than spying on land," Vi smiled at him. "It's a long, long way to Tipperary, isn't it, Mr. Policeman?" She waved her hand to the surrounding sea.

"Yes, he's better here," the little person pronounced. "But how in the name of wonder did he get here? Prisoner, what brought you to the premises?"

"May I smoke?" Reggie smiled and lit a cigar.

"Thanks. Well, the reasons were primarily geological."

"If there's any leg-pulling we'll do it, thank you."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Reggie swept a deprecating glance round the circle of Amazons. "It's unnecessary. The reasons were primarily geological: secondarily, gastronomic or culinary. Somebody sent a hermit crab to Miss Platt Robinson——"

"Oh, help! Platty didn't eat him, did she?" the little person gurgled.

"Is a hermit crab a crime, constable?" said Vi.

"The answer to both questions is in the negative," said Mr. Fortune gravely. "A hermit crab isn't even a clue. He might have come from anywhere round England. But his packing was very interesting; seaweed with some little lumps of sand caught in it, hard red lumps with lighter veins partly shell," he smiled at the small creature. "That gave me the hermit crab's address, you see, Miss—— I'm sorry I didn't catch your name?"

"Couldn't you guess that from the seaweed?" said the little creature. "Bad luck! But you were quite clever, weren't you? What did you find in the sand?"

Mr. Fortune shook his head at her.

"No, not clever, only painstaking. All for your good. I found bits of *trophon contrarius.*"

"Is it catching?"

"No. It's a shellfish of the past. Of the pliocene, in fact, some time before you were born. It indicated that the sand was Red Crag. Red Crag only comes down to the sea between Felixstowe and Frinton. We come next to the gastronomic evidence provided by the tin. That tin had held pigeon pie. There were still fragments adhering. Well, one doesn't buy pigeon pie in tins for ordinary household purposes. So it emerged that somebody who was living in a boat or in camp on this bit of coast took a friendly interest in Miss Platt Robinson. I sent a man down to look for ladies living the simple life near Walton. He discovered your island. So when Miss Platt Robinson vanished I came to call." He smiled. "That's my half of the story. I should like to hear yours, Miss—— It really would be friendly to tell me your name."

The little person looked at him profoundly. She had greenish eyes flecked with brown. Curious eyes which laughed in their solemnity. She said nothing.

It was Vi who spoke with that pugnacious smile of hers. "Does your mother know you're out, Mr. Fortune?"

"You alarm me, madame!"

"That was the idea. You might be here a long time. Quite a long time. You might be peeling potatoes same as Platty. You might be helping her wash-up. Platty would like to have somebody else

wash-up. Specially the bacon plates. We'd lend you some clothes, too. You'd look like a boy scout."

Mr. Fortune sighed. "You don't do me justice, you know. I am really kind at heart. I don't want you to get into serious trouble."

"I should worry!" Vi laughed. "Well, Snooky, what about him? He wants chastening."

"Don't be an owl," said the little person. "Mr. Fortune, you mean if we don't let you go off with Platty there'll be policemen coming to the island?"

"It is only too likely, Miss——"

"Well, what of it? You came here of your own choice. So did Platty. She stood there on the groyne looking like a pelican in the wilderness. Of course, we sent the boat across. When she was getting in she fell into the sea. So we lent her clothes while her own were drying. Then she wouldn't do her share of the washing-up. So Platty was made kitchen orderly. No work, no meals, for Platty. We're nice girls who rescue the perishin'. We're good girls who're findin' work for a forlorn female. Helpin' the unemployed. We're not afraid of your policemen, Mr. Fortune."

"You don't begin at the beginning, do you?" Reggie smiled. "What brought Miss Platt Robinson down to Walton Point, Lady Flora?"

"You pig!" the little person cried. "You knew me all the time!"

"You see, that's my job, to know all the time," Reggie said meekly. "But I don't. I don't know what Miss Platt Robinson will be up to when she gets back to land. There's threatening letters. There's assault. There's kidnapping."

"There isn't!" Lady Flora was shrill. "She came of her own silly, nasty mind."

"Oh, cut it out!" Vi said. "Let's maroon 'em together, Snooky!"

Lady Flora's green eyes gleamed gold. "That's a solution!"

"Not to-night," said Reggie, looking at the sea. The tide was far out. The island was surrounded by wide banks of muddy sand on which the boat lay high and dry. "Lots of time to talk it over, Lady Flora. Do tell me how you brought her down here?"

Lady Flora considered him again.

She looked round at her cohort of girls. "Is he human? Who thinks he's human?"

A number of hands went up.

"Who thinks he's a pig?"

Vi voted for that with a frown.

"Mr. Fortune is human. Sir, listen to the story of our young lives. In the War we were all good little girls making shells. Some fiend sent Platty down as a welfare-worker to our factory. Before we knew where we were, our superintendent was

booted out and Platty had her job. That's Platty's little way. She's the World's Worst Wangler. And then she made us all happy. Platty's great on discipline. Platty's idea of discipline is makin' a girl do everything she don't want the way she hates to do it. She altered all our shifts. She upset all our days off. She turned down half the forewomen and put in a mob of her own. We used to call 'em Platty's Spy Corps. Oh, it was a merry old time. We should have had our own private revolution if the Germans hadn't started theirs first. The Armistice shut the factory down just in time to save Platty's neck. Well, we burnt Platty in effigy on Armistice night and resumed the life of peace. But we didn't forget her. And when we heard she'd wangled another big job, it was felt something had to be done about it. We remonstrated with her by hermit crabs, and so forth. But Platty went on her wicked way. We heard she was disciplining the poor girls in the Records Department same like she disciplined us. Then we took action. I called on Platty. She's always been a little afraid of me——"

"I don't wonder," Reggie murmured.

"Poor me!" said Lady Flora. "No, sir; it's the title that does it. Platty's a snob. Well, I called. I was friendly but patronizin'. I congratulated her on her appointment. I hoped—kind but cold—I

hoped she'd make good. I understood the girls in the Records Department were a wild and wanton crowd. Platty said it was too true, but she was introducin' discipline. I hoped so, superior and incredulous. I had heard there was a party of them down here in camp shockin' the whole East Coast by their costume and conduct. Platty jumped at it. Where were they; who were they; what were they up to? So I gave her the address. And the next time I saw our Platty she was standin' there on the Point gogglin' at us. Wasn't she askin' for it, Mr. Fortune? We brought her over and we gave her discipline. If she isn't a brighter and a better woman, it's not our fault. We've been quite firm with the Platter. She's had to do lots of things she didn't want the way she hates to do them. Look at her now."

Miss Platt Robinson stood glowering at a fire which smoked sullenly beneath a black cauldron.

"Platty's evening hate. She cannot make a fire burn. And if it won't burn, Platty has to wash-up in cold water. So good for Platty. The pains we take with her, Mr. Fortune!"

"Yes—yes," said Reggie dreamily. "Fellows who write plays tell me it's the last act that's the trouble. How's it going to end, Lady Flora? I don't see how it can end happily."

"Dear me, Mr. Fortune"—the little creature re-

sumed her conventional voice—"I thought you had come here to clear it all up. That's what policemen are for, isn't it?"

"Policemen are human, you know. They feel for Miss Platt Robinson. She's a woman and a sister. And sisters can be very unpleasant sometimes. Haven't you noticed it?"

"You don't think she's grateful, Mr. Fortune?" said the little creature sadly.

"Speakin' from observation, I fear she isn't grateful. Speakin' from experience, I'm sure she has no sense of humour. And speakin' for myself, I'm frightened. What did you think of doing with her?"

"We thought a week's education would be enough, Mr. Fortune."

"You'll have police here before that. You'll be in a police-court for threatening letters, assault, and anything else Miss Platt Robinson's lawyers can think of."

"Then it would all come out!" the green eyes laughed. "How gorgeous! But she'd never risk it, Mr. Fortune. Think of Platty's prestige. Think of the girls in the Records Department chortling."

"She'd risk it all right," said Reggie sadly. "Aren't you a little hard on Miss Platt Robinson? You might give her a chance. You'll have to let her

go soon. Why not do it prettily? Let her go now if she'll kiss and be friends."

"Mr. Fortune, you're a wangler yourself!" the little creature cried.

"She shan't kiss me," someone said fervently. It seemed to be the general feeling.

"No doubt that can be arranged." Mr. Fortune smiled upon them.

"All right. It's got to end some time," Lady Flora said. "Shall he wangle?"

Hands went up.

"Shall he not wangle?"

Only the black-browed Vi opposed.

"Go and wangle, sir. First prize for courage—R. Fortune."

Miss Platt Robinson, surrounded by wood smoke, had a rather ghostly appearance.

"This is a distressin' situation, madame," said Reggie.

She struggled with passions. "What are you doing here?" she exploded.

"I'm trying to get you away. But your friends seem to be very determined young people."

"My friends!" Miss Platt Robinson gasped. "Don't you understand that this is an abominable outrage? Look at me!"

"I do—I do," said Reggie; and looked away.

"Oh, Miss Platt Robinson, why did you come here?"

"I was kidnapped, sir."

"But you came alone. We found that out. All the way from London to Walton Point. And these damsels say you asked them to ferry you over."

"It's a conspiracy, Mr. Fortune," said Miss Platt Robinson vehemently. "These wretched girls wanted to get me in their power. That creature, Lady Flora, told me there was a party of my girls from the Records Department out here behaving scandalously. I considered it my duty to investigate. And look how they treated me!"

"Do you really want people to look at you?" Reggie said with emotion. "I mean to say, we can bring some police over here and rescue you. But do you want policemen assistin' you in this—er—*négligé?*"

"It's perfectly disgraceful!" Miss Platt Robinson faltered.

"I'm only thinkin' of you," Reggie murmured. "You see, these young women say they didn't ask you to come, and they won't help you to go, and while you stay you'll have to work for your living."

"But that's outrageous!" Miss Platt Robinson whimpered.

"But the only answer is policemen—and you're in a sweater and shorts!"

"I don't know what they've done with my clothes.

They've no right to keep my clothes. It's—why it's theft, at least. I can prosecute them all. Theft and kidnapping and conspiracy. Oh, they'll be sorry for this!"

"I shouldn't count on it!" Reggie shook his head. "Are you quite sure you want to prosecute, Miss Platt Robinson? If you take 'em into court they'll bring out the whole story. I'm only thinking of you. Do you want to be cross-examined about your camp life? Very sad reading for your girls in the Records Department. And, speakin' officially, I doubt if you'll get a conviction. They'll say you would come where you weren't wanted, and they fished you out of the sea and gave you dry clothes and——"

"But they won't let me go!" Miss Platt Robinson wailed. "Oh, Mr. Fortune, you must do something!"

"It is a distressing situation," Reggie agreed. "They're not fond of you, you know. They seem to think you haven't been nice to them. Why not try it? Bury the past. You want to get away. You don't want scandal. Well, kiss and be friends. Tell 'em if they put you ashore in your own clothes next tide you won't prosecute."

Miss Platt Robinson stared at him. "But I told them that yesterday!" she cried. "They only laughed at me!"

"Is it possible they didn't trust you?" Reggie sighed. "This is very painful. I wonder if they'll trust me?"

"Do try, Mr. Fortune!"

"Freedom and your own skirt, and no prosecution?" Reggie held out his hand. "Promise?"

"Of course!" Miss Platt Robinson took his hand gingerly.

Reggie strolled back to the circle of girls by the tents. "Peace with honour. You put her ashore in the morning clothed and in her right mind. She don't prosecute."

"Good for Platty!" said Lady Flora. "No more washing-up for Platty! Reveal Platty's clothes, Vi. She'll want to dress for dinner."

She did, but she was not sociable. Except towards the lemon cheese-cakes, her manner was restrained. She retired early, desiring to be put ashore as soon as possible in the morning. The flap of a tent fell behind her.

"Well done, Platty!" said Lady Flora. "Didn't she behave prettily? Not one rude word! Quite a reformed character. I thought we could educate her. Those women in her department won't know their Platty." She sighed. "What have I done for thee, England, my England?" The last of the sunset lingered rosy, the moon was rising out of a gleam of silver on the sea, and from the main-

land came faintly the bleating of sheep. "All is peace and I feel so good. It's quite disconcertin', Mr. Fortune."

"Yes. I shouldn't let that worry you," said Reggie.

Between a ground-sheet and a rug he dozed uneasily through that night. Stiff, crumpled, and unshorn in a blaze of morning sunshine, he was landed beside Miss Platt Robinson on Walton Point. She was primly neat. He had never disliked her so much. From the island came three joyful cheers.

"Really!" Miss Platt Robinson muttered, and set her lips.

"I quite agree with you," said Reggie heartily.

But she had no more to say, and she strode out at a round pace. When they came to the town: "I was thinking of a bath and some breakfast," he ventured.

"I am taking the first train to London," said she.

Reggie sighed relief and turned into a barber's.

The next morning, among his letters, he found one from Lady Flora.

"DEAR MR. FORTUNE,—Perhaps it would be good for you to have these. With our love." These were photographs, chiefly of Miss Platt Robinson. Miss Platt Robinson was shown in sweater and shorts blowing the fire, scraping the potatoes, washing the

dishes. But what Mr. Fortune stared at was the postscript, for Lady Flora had written: "Wouldn't they look nice in the picture papers?"

Mrs. Fortune was allured by his expression. "Reggie, have you told me all?" said she tragically, and she came to look. "Oh, bless her! My dear, they ought to have taken her for the movies!"

"I shouldn't wonder if they did," said Reggie morosely.

"But what is this?" She found a photograph of Reggie walking barefoot, with his shoes in his hand, and bowing. "Oh, you precious! I want this enlarged!"

"You have no heart, Joan!" Reggie complained. "No woman has any heart!"

Mrs. Fortune gurgled. She had found another photograph of him putting on his shoes, while a circle of girls admired him. "But it's a Mormon," said she. "A nice, shy Mormon!"

At this point a maid came in to say that Mr. Lomas had rung up to ask Mr. Fortune to go to Scotland Yard at once.

Lomas received him severely. "You wired me that the Platt Robinson was returning safe and in good condition."

"Oh my aunt!" Reggie gasped. "Didn't she?"

"I don't know whether you're mad or she is. As far as I can make out you've been compounding

felony and committing high treason and being no gentleman. Look at that."

It was a letter of many sheets, a formal complaint from Miss Platt Robinson to the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department that she had been kidnapped and kept in captivity by a party of women acting in collusion with one of his officials, Mr. Reginald Fortune. She proposed to call on Mr. Lomas and lay the facts before him. She expected him to take drastic action on her behalf.

"She's not a nice woman, Lomas," said Reggie sadly, "not really a nice woman."

"Good Gad, don't be futile. The woman's capable of dragging the department into a big scandal. What are the facts?"

So Reggie told him. Reggie showed him the photographs.

He was profoundly moved. "Poor wretch, I don't wonder she's peevish."

"No. I thought she was peevish. Do you wonder I told her to hush it up?"

"It's the only thing to do, of course. She'd ruin her position if she drags all this out. Good Gad! Think of these snapshots in the picture papers."

"I do," said Reggie. "I'm in one or two. Lady Flora's very resourceful."

"Oh, the Platt Robinson must let it drop. I'll manage her."

"I wonder," Reggie sighed.

"I can frighten her," said Lomas.

And Miss Platt Robinson came. Lomas put up his eyeglass. Lomas glared at her, Lomas rang for a shorthand writer. "Sit down, madame. You have made a grave charge against a trusted adviser of mine. Mr. Fortune will be present at this interview. I am having a note taken of all that you say. Let me warn you that I am acquainted with all the facts and approve of Mr. Fortune's action throughout. It is entirely owing to his skill and resource that you have been saved from a distressing situation to which you had come by your own folly. You are now breaking a promise which you made in your own interests. You are bringing a false charge against him. I warn you that anything you say without foundation will involve you in very serious consequences."

Miss Platt Robinson flinched. She did not expect to be treated like this. She had been outrageously treated. She wanted those women punished.

"You undertook not to prosecute them in order to prevent the practical joke which they had played on you being made public. Mr. Fortune gave you good advice. You want to break that undertaking. Do you want to see these photographs in the picture papers?" He handed them across the table.

"Oh! Abominable!" Miss Platt Robinson cried, and crushed them into a ball.

"They have the negatives, you know. Do you want to make it public you roused such ill-feeling in the department you last controlled that the women determined to punish you like this?"

"What am I to do? Is nothing to be done for me?"

"We have done a great deal for you. We have extricated you from a most unpleasant situation without scandal. It is more than your conduct gave you a right to expect. I have done with the case."

"No one is to be punished?" Miss Platt Robinson gasped. "What about all those threatening letters I had?"

"Threats? I have read no threats."

"Insulting!"

"Have you any proof who wrote them? We have none."

"You don't want proof!" Miss Platt Robinson cried.

"Good morning, madame," said Lomas: and when she had gone he smiled on Reggie.

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "You know, I should put a man to watch her, Lomas. I don't think she's safe."

"Good Gad!" Lomas dropped his eyeglass and

his smile. "What can she do? Assassinate Lady Flora? Or do you think Lady Flora's rascals will be after her again?"

"Some nice quiet man," Reggie murmured. "She's not safe alone."

It was a month afterwards that Mr. Fortune, visiting Lomas on the matter of the infested marmoset (a crime, you remember, of passion), was shown the report of the detectives who had been observing Miss Platt Robinson. No one had attempted to interfere with the lady. She had gone nowhere except to a few public meetings, and several times on a jaunt by 'bus in the evening from her suburb to Finsbury Park.

"Not worth while keeping the men on the job, is it?" Lomas shrugged. "Evidently Lady Flora's finished with her, and she's not meddling with Lady Flora."

"But why Finsbury Park?" said Reggie. "Lots of nice places nearer home. What does she do at Finsbury Park? I could bear to know that, Lomas."

"My dear fellow, lots of simple people like a 'bus ride on a summer evening."

"She's not simple," Reggie protested. "Not at all a nice woman, Lomas. Tell your fellows to find out what she does at Finsbury Park."

"Oh, very well," Lomas shrugged. "You've got

Miss Platt Robinson on your nerves, Reginald."

"I have, I have."

Two weeks later there came to Lomas a letter from the Minister of Social Welfare. Mr. Weeley regretted to find that the Criminal Investigation Department had failed to discover the author of the threatening letters received by Miss Platt Robinson. Emboldened, he was compelled to assume, by this strange inertia of the police, this person had now sent letters of a more scandalous character. Very fortunately, however, impunity had made the author rash. If Mr. Lomas would kindly call upon him, he would be able to point out evidence which must lead to drastic action.

"Yes. I shouldn't wonder if he's right," Mr. Fortune smiled.

"You know this woman's a public nuisance," Lomas groaned. "Who's after her now?"

"Have you got that letter we found in her blotting-book?"

"Of course I have. All the Platt Robinson communications—except the hermit crab. You had that."

"He wouldn't keep. But the letter will."

"We never found out how it came to her, you know. It wasn't posted."

"No. It wasn't posted," Reggie smiled. "That's what's interesting. Lomas, my dear old thing, what

about Finsbury Park? What did Miss Platt Robinson do at Finsbury Park?"

Lomas rang for the reports. They testified that on three nights during the past fortnight Miss Platt Robinson had posted a letter, once certainly a blue letter, in a certain pillar-box at Finsbury Park. "Very sound man, that man," Reggie murmured, and turned the pages of the London Directory. "Pillar-box at the corner of Curtis Road and Garden Road. Garden Road . . . yes. Lomas, dear, ring up Mr. Weeley and tell him we'll come round to him now if he'll have Miss Platt Robinson and her letters ready for us."

"I don't see my way," Lomas protested.

"My dear fellow! Oh, my dear fellow!" Reggie chuckled. "Then leave it to me."

They found Mr. Weeley frowning majestically, guarded by a cynical secretary who did not conceal his disgust for the whole affair. Over against him Miss Platt Robinson swelled and preened herself. Mr. Weeley spoke. He had to complain of the manner in which the Criminal Investigation Department had handled this serious case. He was bound to say —he desired to point out—he must add—and he had only to remark in conclusion. It was deplorable that inertia—he did not wish to use the word incompetence—should expose a valued public servant to such persecution.

"Yes. It will save time if we come to the facts, sir," Reggie said. "I understand Miss Platt Robinson has received some fresh letters! Where are they?"

Mr. Weeley again delivered an oration. The secretary handed Reggie six letters. They were on pale blue rough paper. They were in a bold hand. Their tone was alike. The last said: "Do not imagine you will be allowed to stay here. We shall get you out somehow. No outsiders here. The Civil Service does not want them. I have had more than enough of your meddling. I have friends and influence behind me. You will not be superintendent long."

Reggie read it aloud. "Very painful. The work of a spiteful and cunning mind," he said gravely. "And Miss Platt Robinson has evidence who was the writer."

"Look at the postmark, please." Miss Platt Robinson smiled.

"Posted—last Friday—N.4. The others the same."

"N.4 is Finsbury Park," said Miss Platt Robinson. "Perhaps Mr. Fortune will compare the writing with this." She handed him an official document signed E. Thornton.

"Surely I have seen this writing before?" Reggie frowned.

"Do you know her?" Miss Platt Robinson cried.

"I have only met her in your room, madame. When we were investigating the earlier letters you gave me a document written by your assistant-superintendent. You suspected her then."

"I have always suspected her," Miss Platt Robinson cried. "Don't you see the likeness?"

"It leaps to the eye," said Mr. Weeley. "Yes, positively I am compelled to say. It leaps to the eye."

"And Miss Thornton lives at Finsbury Park," Miss Platt Robinson cried in triumph. "23 Garden Road, Finsbury Park. That is the paper she uses. Look, here is a note of hers. She writes with a J nib."

"You've prepared the evidence very carefully, madame," Reggie said.

"The writing is surely conclusive," Mr. Weeley pronounced.

"Yes. The writing is like Miss Thornton's writing," Reggie said. "But it's even more like this." He produced the letter found in Miss Platt Robinson's blotting book and read it out: " 'You will not be superintendent long.' Just compare that, sir."

Miss Platt Robinson became red. "Where did you get that?" she gasped.

"You see the resemblance, Mr. Weeley. Six weeks ago, when Miss Platt Robinson's sudden ab-

sence from London alarmed some of her friends, they called us in. Lomas and I went to her house to make inquiries. We found this letter on her writing table. We found some of this blue paper. We found one of her pens fitted with a J nib. The letter has not been posted, you see. It is obvious that it was an experiment in imitating Miss Thornton's writing. The first of the series. The others were posted by Miss Platt Robinson herself. In the last few weeks she has often been to Finsbury Park of nights. Fortunately she was attended by a detective. He has seen her post four letters in the pillar-box near Miss Thornton's house at the corner of Garden Road. Last Friday he saw that the letter was blue. Miss Platt Robinson has been writing herself these letters in order to bring a false charge against her assistant-superintendent. I don't know whether you wish the case to go to the Public Prosecutor or whether you will deal with it yourself."

"Obviously a case for the Public Prosecutor," said Lomas.

"Good heavens, woman, what have you done?" Mr. Weeley cried.

"It's a conspiracy, Mr. Weeley," Miss Platt Robinson wailed. "They've been working against me all through. They had no business in my house! Setting detectives to watch me. Outrageous!"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Weeley. "Out-

rageous, indeed. Is that all you have to say? Don't you see what you've done? You've involved the office in a scandal, a gross scandal, madame. It's intolerable. A most painful thing. You've betrayed my confidence in you in the most deplorable way. Really—oh, you must go."

"Not back to the department, Miss Platt Robinson," said the secretary.

"Not——? Oh, Mr. Weeley, you don't mean that?"

"Great heavens, woman, you don't think you can retain your position after this?"

Miss Platt Robinson's eyes swelled at him. The words which came to Miss Platt Robinson were: "Outrageous! Really outrageous!" She rose. She made strange noises. "It's a conspiracy against me," she announced. "You've all agreed to trump this up. I won't bear it. I'd rather resign." The door slammed behind her.

"Not really a nice woman," Reggie murmured.

"Yes, yes—I mean no, of course," Mr. Weeley bleated. "A most painful affair. At the same time I am bound to point out, Lomas—I do hope you agree with me—no reason why it should go any further."

"Now she's gone I dare say Miss Thornton won't want to prosecute her," Lomas shrugged.

"Miss Thornton's a very good official," said the secretary.

"Yes, quite so, quite so. It is a mistaken policy to appoint these outsiders. I always thought so," said Mr. Weeley.

Outside in the corridor: "But I wish we could have sacked him too," said Reggie sadly.

"You never will," Lomas sighed. "Not while England's England. Even you have your limitations, Reginald. That comforts me. For I find you rather diabolical."

"No. No. Only careful," said Mr. Fortune.

TRIAL V

THE LONG BARROW

MR. FORTUNE came back from the Zoo pensive. He had been called to the inquest on Zuleika the lemur—a strange, sad case.

He rang for tea, and was given a lady's card. Miss Isabel Woodall, who had no address, wished to consult Mr. Fortune: she had been waiting half an hour. Mr. Fortune sighed and went into the anteroom.

Miss Isabel Woodall stood up, a woman who had been younger, still demurely handsome. She was large and fair, but so plainly and darkly dressed that she made little of herself. "Mr. Fortune?" she said with a pleasant shy smile.

"Yes. I'm afraid you didn't know that I'm not in practice now."

"But I didn't come to see you—er—medically. I'm not a patient, Mr. Fortune. I'm not ill. At least I don't think so. I wanted to consult you about a mystery."

"Oh! I never go into a mystery except with the police, Miss Woodall."

"The police won't do anything. They laugh at us." She twisted her handkerchief in her hands. "I'm frightfully worried, Mr. Fortune. And I don't know what to do." She looked at him with large, anxious eyes. "Do you mind hearing about it?"

Reggie Fortune decided that he did not mind. She was good to look at. He opened the door of his consulting-room.

"I'm Mr. Larkin's secretary," she explained. "Mr. Joseph Larkin: do you know him?"

"The antiquary?" Reggie Fortune murmured.

"Archæologist," Miss Woodall corrected him sharply. "He's the greatest authority on the Stone Age in England, Mr. Fortune. He has a house down in Dorsetshire, just on the border of the New Forest country, Restharrow, Stoke Abbas." As she seemed to expect it Reggie made a note. "I've been working with him down there. But lately it's been horrible, Mr. Fortune." Her voice went up. "As if somebody wanted to drive me away."

"Yes. Now suppose we begin at the beginning. How long have you been Mr. Larkin's secretary?"

"Oh, more than six months now."

"And nobody was ever horrible to you before?"

She stared at him. "Of course not. Nothing ever happened to me before. What do you mean,

Mr. Fortune? You don't think it's Mr. Larkin, do you?"

"I haven't begun to think," said Reggie. "Well, you lived a peaceful life till you became Mr. Larkin's secretary. And then?"

"Oh, yes, and long after that. It was all quite peaceful while we were in London. But in the spring Mr. Larkin took this house at Stoke Abbas. It's a very lovely place, where the moors meet the downs. Mr. Larkin wanted to study the prehistoric remains about there. There's lots of them, ancient earthworks and burial places."

"Yes. Several long barrows on the hills."

She leaned forward clasping her hands. "That's it, Mr. Fortune," she said in a low eager voice. "Mr. Larkin has been making plans to excavate the long barrow above Stoke Abbas. Did you know about it?"

Reggie smiled. "No. No. I'm afraid Mr. Larkin hadn't attracted my attention."

She flung herself back in her chair. She gave a little cry of irritation. "Do please be serious! That's just like the stupid police down there. They only make fun of it all as if I was a nervous fool. But it's horrible, Mr. Fortune."

"Why not tell me what it is?" Reggie suggested.

"That is what is so difficult,"—she looked down at herself, arranging the blouse at her bosom. "You

see, there isn't anything definite. It's as if some one was working against me: as if some one wanted to hurt me. I'm being followed, Mr. Fortune. Whenever I go out alone I'm followed."

Reggie sighed. Many people have made that complaint to patient doctors and incredulous policemen. "Who follows you?" he said wearily.

"But I don't know! Only I'm sure there is somebody. I'm being watched."

"Why should anybody watch you, Miss Woodall?"

"That's what I want to know," she cried. "But somebody does, Mr. Fortune. I've heard him. I've seen his shadow."

"Oh, you are sure it's a man," Reggie smiled.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Miss Woodall was growing angry with him. "That isn't all. When I go out alone I find dead animals."

Reggie sat up. "Do you though?"

She thought he was still satirical. "Yes, I do, Mr. Fortune. Real ones. I've found two crows and another bird—a jay, I think it was—and a weasel. Horrible." She shuddered.

"Extraordinary mortality among the animals of Stoke Abbas," Reggie murmured. "How did they die, Miss Woodall?"

"Good gracious, I don't know. They were very dead. Just on the path where I was walking."

"Yes, that's very interesting," said Reggie.

"It frightens me, Mr. Fortune. What does it mean?"

"I should rather like to know," Reggie admitted. "Yes, I'll look into it, Miss Woodall."

"You yourself? Oh, thank you so much. If you would! I do so want it cleared up." She was effusively grateful. She fumbled in her bag. "I really don't know what your fee is, Mr. Fortune."

"There isn't one, Miss Woodall." He got rid of her. He consulted a book of reference upon Mr. Joseph Larkin. "I wonder," he said, and rang again for tea.

On the next day he sat down to lunch in that one of his clubs where they understand the virtues of the herring. The chief of the Criminal Investigation Department saw him, and tripped across to his table. Both men love the simple life. They engaged upon a profound discussion whether the herring when pickled is the better for cloves. "In the delights of your conversation, Reginald," the Hon. Sidney Lomas protested at last, "I'm forgetting that I wanted to speak to you. A quaint old bird came to me this morning, one Joseph Larkin, an archæologist. He said——"

"He said," Reggie interrupted, "that he wanted to excavate a long barrow at Stoke Abbas and somebody was interferin' with the progress of science

and nobody loved him, and what are the police for, anyway? Is that right, sir?"

"How do you do it, Reginald? Messages from the spirit-world, or just thought-reading?"

Reggie smiled. "Satan's Invisible World Displayed: by R. Fortune. No, Lomas, old thing. No magic. The fair Isabel told me her sorrow."

"That's Miss Woodall, the secretary? She came to you, did she? The old boy didn't tell me that."

"Well, the fair Isabel didn't tell me Joseph was going to you."

The two men looked at each other. "Curious lack of confidence about them," said Lomas.

"Yes. Several curious points. Well, what's Joseph's story? Is he followed when he goes out alone? Find dead animals in the path?"

"No carcasses for him. They're kept for Miss Woodall. He's followed. He hears strange noises at night. They come from outside the house. He's quite clear about that."

"Isabel didn't mention noises," Reggie murmured.

"No. The old boy said she hadn't heard them, and he didn't want to worry her, for she was worried quite enough. That's his chief trouble. He seems rather gone on his fair secretary. What did you make of her, Reginald?"

"She's got the wind up all right. And she wasn't born yesterday. Queer case."

"Simple enough," Lomas shrugged. "The old boy goes down to this lonely place and wants to dig up an old grave and the country people don't like it and put up practical jokes to scare him off. That's what the local police think. I've been talking to them on the 'phone this morning."

"And the local police don't want to have a fuss with the local people over a couple of strangers."

"I sympathize," Lomas smiled. "Anyway, there's nothing for us."

"I wonder," Reggie said. "Why did one come to me and the other to you?"

"Oh, my dear fellow! They're both scared, and each of them wants to hide it from the other. Each of 'em thinks something horrid may happen to the other and wants protection without making the other more scared."

"Yes. All very natural. Do you know anything about 'em?"

"Joseph is a man of means. Isabel came to him six months ago. Very highly qualified, he says. Classical scholar. Woman in a thousand for his job."

Reggie smiled. "His job! My dear fellow, he hasn't got a job. He's only a crank. He's always fussing round here, there and everywhere. Why is he so mighty keen on this particular long barrow? Why is Isabel so mighty nervous about

being followed? She's no chicken and no fool."

"I don't know what you're getting to, Reginald," Lomas frowned.

"Nor do I. That's what worries me. I want to go and look at Stoke Abbas. Let me have Underwood."

"But what are you thinking of?" Lomas objected.

"I think it isn't as natural as it looks," said Mr. Fortune.

In the morning his car picked up Sergeant Underwood and bore that officer away on the Southampton road. Sergeant Underwood, who looks like a nice, innocent undergraduate, lay back luxuriously enjoying the big car's purring speed. Reggie was studying an ordnance map of large scale. They were rushing the hill to Bagshot before he put it away and smiled on Underwood. "Well, my child, do you think you'll like it?"

"I like working under you, Mr. Fortune. But I don't know what I have to do."

"You have to catch butterflies. You're a promisin' young entomologist lookin' for rare species round the New Forest." He proceeded to give a lecture on English butterflies and moths. "Entomology in one lesson: by R. Fortune. Got that?"

Sergeant Underwood gasped a little. The labours of his intellect were betrayed on his comely face.

"Yes, sir. Some of it. But Mr. Lomas said something about a long barrow. I don't rightly know what a long barrow is. But how does that come into butterflies?"

"It doesn't. A long barrow is the mound over an old grave. Thousands of years old." He opened the ordnance map. "This is our long barrow. Mr. Larkin and Miss Woodall—who live in that house —want to dig it up. And funny things have been happening. You're going to find a room in a nice pub somewhere near, but not too near, and watch the barrow and watch them and watch everybody—while catching butterflies."

In Southampton he bought Sergeant Underwood the complete equipment of a butterfly hunter and put him on the train to find his own way to Stoke Abbas. The car bore Mr. Fortune on through the green glades of the New Forest to the bare heath country.

It was a day of cloud, and the very air over the moors was grey, and the long waves of heather were dark as the black earth, the distant woodland had no colour, the form of the chalk hills to northward was vague and dim. Mr. Fortune stopped the car and looked about him. Some grey smoke hung in a hollow from unseen houses. As far as he could see there was no man nor any of the works of man. The moor carried no cattle. There was no sign of

life but the hum of bees and the chirp of grasshoppers and the flies and butterflies in the heavy air.

"Empty, isn't it, Sam?" said Mr. Fortune, and got out of the car.

"Brighter London!" said Sam the chauffeur.

Mr. Fortune took a track across the heather. It was heavy going, rather like a ditch than a path, an old track long disused and overgrown, but its depth showed that many feet must have passed that way once. It passed by a grey hovel lurking in a dip of the moor where a shaggy donkey was tethered and some fowls of the old game-cock breed scratched in the sand. The thatch of heather was ragged, the mud walls crumbling here and there showed the wattle framework, the little windows were uncurtained.

The track led on to a bluff hill. Mr. Fortune groaned (he does not love walking) and set himself to climb. The hill-side was seared by a long scar. When he came to it he found the double ditch and bank of an old fort. He scrambled in and out and reached the flat hill-top. There rose the mound of the long barrow of Stoke Abbas.

Mr. Joseph Larkin had done no digging yet. Nor anyone else. The mound was clothed in heather and old gnarled gorse. The black sods beneath had not been turned for many a year.

Reggie looked over miles of bare moor and saw no one between him and the horizon. But on one side the hill was scooped out like a bowl, and down in the depths a rabbit scuttered to its burrow. Mr. Fortune went down that way. A man was squatting in the heather, binding bunches of it into little brooms, far too busy to look at him. "Oh, good day," said Mr. Fortune, and stopped. "What's the name of that thing up there?"

The man lifted his bent shoulders and showed a dark beardless face, wide across the cheekbones, a big head for his small size. He stared like a startled animal.

"Do you know the name of that thing up there?" Reggie said again.

"Dragon Hill, 'tis Dragon Hill," the man cried, gathered up brooms and slid away through the heather. His legs were short, he was broad in the beam, his speed was surprising.

Mr. Fortune trudged back to his car and was driven to the house of Mr. Joseph Larkin. It stood beyond the village in a shrubbery of rhododendrons, a plain red-brick box. Mr. Larkin was out. Miss Woodall was out too.

The conventional furniture of the drawing-room was dismal. It seemed to contain no book but "Paradise Lost," illustrated by Gustave Doré. Mr. Fortune shuddered and wandered drearily to and

fro till he found on the writing-table the catalogue of a second-hand bookseller.

Mr. Larkin seemed to have an odd taste in books. Those which he had chosen to mark were a mixed lot—somebody's sermons, a child's picture book, Mr. Smiles on Thrift, a history of aviation, Izaak Walton. He marked them in a queer way. A line was drawn under one letter. Reggie Fortune pondered. The letters underlined were S K U T H A I: probably more farther on in the catalogue. But someone was talking outside. Reggie put the catalogue back.

A chubby old fellow came in smiling. "Mr. Reginald Fortune? I don't think I have the pleasure——"

"You called on Scotland Yard, Mr. Larkin."

"Oh, you've come from Mr. Lomas! That's very good of you, very good indeed." He smiled all over his rosy face. "Now let's just go into the study and I'll tell you all about it."

He did. He told at great length, but he did not say anything new, and in the midst of it Miss Woodall arrived in a hurry. "Mr. Fortune! You've come down yourself! But how very kind." While she took Reggie's hand she smiled on Joseph Larkin.

He needed it. He had been much disconcerted. "Oh, do you know Mr. Fortune, my dear?" he said, frowning.

"I didn't. But he is the great expert, you know. I went to him to ask his advice about this horrible business."

"But my dear child, you didn't tell me."

"I couldn't bear you to be so worried, Mr. Larkin,"—she laid her hand on his arm.

"There, there. But you shouldn't, you know. You really shouldn't, my dear. Leave everything to me."

"You are kind," she murmured.

"I have arranged it all," Mr. Larkin chirped. "I went to the fountain head, Mr. Sidney Lomas. And here is our expert." He beamed on Reggie. "Now —now I think I've told you everything, Mr. Fortune."

"Well, not quite," Reggie murmured. "Why are you specially keen on this long barrow, Mr. Larkin?"

Mr. Larkin began to explain. It took a long time. It was something about Phœnicians. The Phœnicians, Reggie gathered, had been everywhere and done everything before the dawn of time. Mr. Larkin had given his life to prove it. He had found evidence in many prehistoric remains in many countries. When he came down to Stoke Abbas to complete his great book on "The Origins of Our World" he found this fine barrow at his very door. Miss Woodall very properly suggested to him that——

"Oh, Mr. Larkin, I'm afraid it wasn't me." Miss Woodall smiled. "I'm not expert enough to advise."

"Well, well, my dear, you're a very capable assistant. We decided that when we'd finished the book we must excavate the barrow on Dragon Hill, Mr. Fortune."

"And that's how the trouble began," Reggie murmured. "Yes. Any particular reason why you came to Stoke Abbas?"

Mr. Larkin looked at Miss Woodall. "I—I really don't know. I think this house was the most suitable of any that you saw, my dear."

"Oh, much the most suitable. Mr. Larkin must have quiet, you see, Mr. Fortune."

"And this is charmingly quiet, my dear." They purred at each other and Reggie felt embarrassed. "Charming—if only Mr. Fortune can stop this annoyance. I hope you'll stay with us, Mr. Fortune."

They went early to bed at Restharrow. About midnight Mr. Fortune, just dropping off to sleep, was roused by an odd whistling roaring noise, such a noise as a gale might make. But there was no gale. He went to the window and peered out. The moon was rising behind clouds, and he could see nothing but the dark mass of rhododendrons. There was a tap at the door and Mr. Larkin came in with

a candle showing his pale face. "That's the noise, Mr. Fortune," he said. "What is it?"

"I wonder. Miss Woodall sleeps on the other side of the house?"

"Yes. I don't think she has ever heard it. It only comes and goes, you know. There! It's stopped. It'll come again. Off and on for half an hour or so. Most distressing. What can it be, Mr. Fortune?"

"I should rather like to know," Reggie murmured. They stood and listened and shivered, and when all was quiet at last he had some difficulty in getting Mr. Larkin to bed.

Reggie rose early. He saw the post come in, but Mr. Larkin and Miss Woodall were both down to take their letters. There was some mild fun about it. Mr. Larkin took the whole post by playful force and sorted it with little jokes about "censoring your correspondence, my dear." It appeared to Reggie that the old gentleman was jealous in the matter of his fair secretary. But the only thing for her was a bookseller's catalogue.

After breakfast the two shut themselves into the study to work. Mr. Fortune went walking, and upon the moor found Sergeant Underwood in pursuit of a cabbage butterfly. His style with the net was truculent. "Game and set," Mr. Fortune smiled.

"Fierce fellow. Don't be brutal, my child. No wanton shedding of blood."

Sergeant Underwood retrieved his net from a bramble. "I never hit the perishing things," he said, and mopped his brow.

"Never mind. You look zealous. Keep an eye on the hut over there in the hollow. I want to know who comes out and what he does."

After lunch Mr. Larkin and Miss Woodall rested from their labours. The old gentleman withdrew to his bedroom. The lady sat in the garden. Reggie went out. To the west of the grounds of Restharrow a clump of lime and elm rose to shelter the house from the wind. Reggie went up into one of the elms and climbed till he was hidden and high. He saw Miss Woodall leave the garden alone. She turned off the road by a footpath which led across the moor. Reggie took binoculars from his pocket. She went some way, looked about her and sat down in the heather. Her back was towards him, but he could see that she bent over a paper. Ahead of her a little dark shape moved in the heather, came near the path, and turned away and was lost in the folds of the moor. Miss Woodall rose and walked on. She stopped, she drew aside, looked all about her, and went on more quickly. Reggie steadied his binoculars on the bough. She was going into the village, and among the houses he lost sight of her.

He slid to the ground and met her on her way back. "Alone, Miss Woodall? That's very brave."

"Isn't it?" She was flushed. "Do you know what I found on the path?"

"Yes. I've seen it. A dead stoat."

"Oh, horrible! What does it mean, Mr. Fortune?"

"I shouldn't worry about that," said Reggie. He went on. He saw a butterfly net waving.

"This is a rum business, sir," Sergeant Underwood protested. "A little fellow came out of that hut, kind of gipsy look, and he mooched about over the heath. Seemed to be looking at snares he had set. He found a beast over that way, and sat down there making brooms. Then a woman came down from the house, and he scuttles along and chucked the beast on to the path and cut off. Very rum game."

"Nothing in it," said Reggie sadly. "Well, we'd better deal with him. Go to your pub, my child, and have some food and a nap. I want you outside that hut after dark."

Soon after dinner that night Mr. Fortune professed himself sleepy and went to his room. He smoked a cigar there, heard the household go to bed, changed into flannels and rubber shoes, and dropped unostentatiously out of the window. Among the rhododendrons he waited. It was a calm, grey

night; he could see far, he could hear the faintest sound. Yet he had seen and heard nothing when from behind the hedge which marked off the kitchen garden came that whistling roaring noise. Mr. Fortune made for it, stealthily, as it seemed to him, silently. But he had only caught sight of a little man whirling something at the end of a string when the noise ended in a whiz and the fellow ran off. Mr. Fortune followed, but running is not what he does best. The little man was leaving him from the start and soon vanished into the moor. Mr. Fortune at a sober trot made for the hovel under the hill, and as he drew near whistled.

He arrived to find Sergeant Underwood sitting on a little man who wriggled. "I'm a police officer, that's what I am," Underwood was saying. "Now don't you be nasty, or I'll have to be harsh with you."

Reggie flashed a torch in the wide, dark face of the broom-maker, and signed to Underwood to let him sit up. "You've given me a lot of trouble," he said sadly. "Why do you worry the lady? She don't like dead stoats."

"Her don't belong on the moor," said the little man sulkily. "Her should bide in her own place."

"The old gentleman, too. You've worried him with your nasty noises. It won't do."

"He should leave the land quiet. 'Tis none of hisn."

"They are quiet. Quite quiet. They've never done any harm."

"Fie, fie! That they have surely, master. They do devise to dig up old Dragon's grave. 'Tis a wicked, harmful thing."

"It don't hurt you if they see what's inside the old mound."

"Nay, it don't hurt Giles. Giles was here before they come, me and mine, ten thousand year and all. Giles will be here when they be gone their way. But 'tis evil to pry into old Dragon's grave. There's death in it, master."

"Whoever died there in your time?" Reggie said quickly.

"Nay, none to my time. But there's death in it, for sure. Bid 'em go their ways, master, and leave the moor quiet."

"They'll do you no harm, my lad. And you mustn't bother them. No more of these tricks of yours, Giles, or we'll have to put you in gaol."

The little man squeaked and took hold of his knees and stroked them. "Ah, you wouldn't be so hard. I do belong on the moor, me and mine. I don't break no laws."

"Oh, yes, you do, hunting these folks. You ought to be in gaol now, my lad. You've made a lot of

trouble. If there's any more of it you'll be shut up in a little close cell, not walking in the wind on the moor."

"Nay, master, you wouldn't do it to a poor man."

"You be good, then. I know all about you, you know. If the Restharrow folks have any more trouble it's gaol for Giles."

The little man breathed deep. "The old Dragon can have them for Giles."

"Don't forget. By the way, where's the thing you made the noise with?"

The little man grinned, and pulled out of his coat a bent piece of wood at the end of a cord. When he whirled it round his head it made the whistling roar of a gale.

Mr. Fortune came back to his bedroom by the window and slept the sleep of the just. He did not reach the breakfast table till Joseph and Isabel were nearly finished. "All my apologies. I had rather a busy night." Miss Woodall hoped he had not been disturbed. "No, not disturbed. Interested." Mr. Larkin visibly quivered with curiosity. He thought Mr. Fortune had gone out.

"Out on the moor at night?" Miss Woodall shuddered. "I wouldn't do that for anything."

Mr. Fortune tapped his third egg. "Why should you? But no one will meddle with you, Miss Wood-

all. That fellow that made the trouble won't bother you any more."

"Who was it?" she said eagerly.

"Well, I shouldn't worry. One of the local people suffering from superstition. He thought it was dangerous to dig up the old barrow. He wanted to scare you off. But I've scared him, and he's seen the evil of his ways. I think we'll give him a free pardon. He wouldn't have hurt you. You can rule him out and get on with the excavation."

"But that's magnificent, perfectly magnificent," Mr. Larkin chirped. "How quick too! You've really done wonderfully well." He twittered thanks.

"You're quite sure about it, Mr. Fortune?" said Miss Woodall.

"Nothing more to be afraid of, Miss Woodall."

"How splendid!" She smiled at him. "Oh, you don't know what a relief it is."

Mr. Larkin plunged into plans for the excavation. Old White at the Priors had promised to let him have men at any time before harvest. No time to lose. Better see the old man at once. Why not that morning? He did hope Mr. Fortune would stay and watch the excavation. Most interesting. Mr. Fortune shook his head. Perhaps he might be allowed to come down and see the result.

"That's a promise, sir. An engagement," Mr.

Larkin cried. "We shall hold you to that, shan't we, my dear?"

"Of course," said Miss Woodall.

They went off together to see old White—it seemed impossible for Mr. Larkin to make any arrangements by himself. Reggie was left in the house waiting for his car. He wandered into the study. Everything had been tidied away. Everything but the books was locked up. "Careful souls," Reggie murmured, and paused by a waste-paper basket. It had some crumpled stuff in it. He smoothed out the catalogue of a draper's sale. Some articles had been marked by a line under a letter. He ran his eye over the pages. T A P H O N O I G E I N he read, and heard the horn of his car. He dropped the catalogue back in the basket and slid out of the study as the door bell rang. The maid coming to tell him his car was at the door found him in his bedroom writing a letter.

The big car purred over the heath, passed a man pursuing butterflies, slowed and stopped. The chauffeur went to examine his back tyres. The passenger leaned out and watched. When the car rolled on again there was something white by the roadside. The butterfly hunter crossed the road and picked up a letter. The passenger glanced back. "Now let her out, Sam," he said.

In the late afternoon the Hon. Sidney Lomas,

making an end of his day's work in Scotland Yard, was surprised by the arrival of Mr. Fortune. "Oh, Reginald, this is so sudden," he complained. "Finished already? Has Isabel no charms?"

"Some of your weaker tea would do me no harm," said Mr. Fortune. "Isabel's a very interestin' woman, Lomas. Joseph also has points of interest. They're both happy now."

"Cleared it up, have you? What was it?"

"It was a son of the soil. Very attractive person. Bushman type. Probably a descendant of some prehistoric race. You do find 'em about in odd corners. Family lurking on that moor for centuries. He had a notion if anybody opened the old Dragon barrow death came out of it. Probably a primeval belief. So he set himself to scare off Joseph and Isabel—tokens of death for 'em—the bull-roarer at nights."

"What in wonder is a bull-roarer?"

"Oh, a bit of wood rather like a boomerang. You twirl it round on the end of a string and it makes the deuce of a row. Lots of savages use them to scare off outsiders and evil spirits. Very curious survival is Giles. Well, we caught him at it and bade him desist. He's in a holy funk of prison, and he's going to be good. And Joseph and Isabel are getting on with the excavation."

Lomas smiled. "So it was just the local rustic

playing the fool. Reginald, my friend, I enjoy the rare and exquisite pleasure of saying I told you so."

"Yes." Reggie drank his tea. "Yes. Tell me some more, Lomas. Why did Joseph and Isabel go down to this place off the map and get keen on excavating its barrow? Lots of other nice barrows."

"Do you think there's something special in this one?"

"No. I think there's something special in Joseph and Isabel. I found in the house a second-hand bookseller's catalogue. Some letters in it were underlined: S K U T H A I. Probably more. I hadn't time to go on. Joseph came in, and afterwards the catalogue vanished."

"Lots of people mark catalogues," Lomas shrugged.

"Yes. But not so that the marks make a word."

"Word?"

"Lomas, my dear old thing, I thought you had a classical education. S K U T H A I is Greek for Scythians, and in Athens the policemen were Scythians."

"Oh, this is fantastic."

"Well, to-day I found a draper's catalogue in a waste-paper basket. Letters marked as before. T A P H O N O I G E I N. Probably more, again. But that's two words. Taphon oigein. To open

the tomb. Either Joseph or Isabel is making very secret communications with somebody about excavating that barrow. Why?"

"You do run on," Lomas protested. "But what are you starting from? These people have been doing their damnedest to get the police to look into their affairs. If either of them was up to anything shady, that's the last thing they'd want."

"There's about a dozen answers to that," said Reggie wearily. "Have some. Suppose something suspicious happens later. Mr. Lomas will say 'Oh, nothing in it, these people must be all right, they came and asked us to look into their affairs.' Why, you're saying that already. In the second place, both of them may not be in it; perhaps one of them knew the other was going to the police and played for safety by going too. Thirdly, they were both rattled, one of them may have thought somebody knew more than was convenient and wanted to make sure. Fourthly and lastly, my brethren, whatever the job is, it has something to do with opening this barrow. They're both dead keen on that. They wanted to make sure they could do it without bother."

"Very ingenious, Reginald. And partially convincing," Lomas frowned. "If you'll tell me what they can get by excavating a barrow, I might begin to believe you."

"Nothing," said Reggie, "nothing. That's why it's interesting."

"My dear fellow! You have too much imagination."

"Oh lord, no. None. I'm the natural man. I get nerves when things aren't nice and normal. Hence my modest fame. But imaginative! Oh, Mr. Lomas, sir, how can you?"

"Well, well. Time will show," Lomas rose. "If any corpses lie out on the shining sand, I'll let you know."

"That'll be all right," said Reggie cheerfully. He did not move. "I left Underwood down there."

"The deuce you did!" Lomas stared and sat down again. "And what's he doing?"

"He catching butterflies. He's also finding out whether Joseph or Isabel posts any catalogues and where they go to."

"Confound you, he mustn't do that on his own. If you want postal correspondence examined we must apply to the Postmaster-General. You ought to know that, Fortune."

"My dear old thing, I do. I also know country post offices. Don't be so beastly official."

"This is a serious matter."

"Yes. Yes, that's what I've been trying to indicate," Mr. Fortune smiled. "Look here. These beauties go down to a place off the map for no de-

cent reason but that it's off the map. Joseph could write his silly books anywhere. Did Isabel take Joseph or Joseph take Isabel? Their stories don't agree. Joseph is affectionate and Isabel coy. Joseph watches her jealously and Isabel is meek. When they've been there some time they get mighty keen on digging up a barrow. Lots of barrows in lots of places, but they must have the lonely one at Stoke Abbas. Then we find them dealing in messages too secret for a letter in plain English. One message something about police, another about opening the barrow. Well, there's going to be dirty work at the cross roads, old thing."

"But it's all fanciful, Fortune. Why the deuce shouldn't they write letters? What's the use of putting a message in Greek?"

"They're all alone. Each of 'em can see all the letters the other gets, perhaps all the letters the other posts. But a catalogue wouldn't be noticed. If one of 'em don't know Greek the marked letters would be absolutely secret. S K U T H A I didn't suggest anything to the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department."

"But what do you suppose the game is?"

"No, dear,"—Mr. Fortune smiled—"I have no imagination. You've got all the facts. Oh, not quite. I did a little distant snapshot of Joseph and Isabel." He laid a roll of film on the table. "Get

the faces enlarged big. Some of your fellows might know 'em. Good-bye. I've got to dine with my young niece—the one that married a gunner. Always merry and bright. Very exhausting."

After which nothing happened for a couple of weeks. Lomas when he met Mr. Fortune in their clubs made sarcastic remarks about the Greek language and the use of the imagination. Then Joseph Larkin wrote to Mr. Fortune that the excavation was nearly complete, urging him to come and see the result. Mr. Fortune told Lomas over the telephone and Lomas made scornful noises. "I'm going," said Mr. Fortune.

"You've got a lot of time to waste," said the telephone.

But three days afterwards, while the car stood at his door to take him to Stoke Abbas, the telephone spoke again. "Hallo, Fortune. Are you up? Marvellous. Just come round here."

Lomas was in an early morning temper. "Some more crazy stuff about that Stoke Abbas case." He stared at Reggie with a bilious eye. "I put the post office people on to it, more fool me. Here's a report. A bookseller's catalogue was posted on Monday with a number of letters from Restharrow. It was addressed to Miss George, 715 Sand Street, Bournemouth. In it a number of letters were marked, a, b, four e's, g, h, two i's, l, m, n, p, r, two s's, t and u."

"As you say," Reggie groaned.

"What do you mean?"

"You said more fool you. Quite so. Why didn't you leave it to Underwood? He'd have got it all right. And I told him to give us the letters in order."

"Confound you, we can't tamper with the mail."

"My dear old thing, you're too good for this world." Reggie took pen and paper. "Say it again. A, b——" He wrote down ABEEEEGHIILMNPRSSTU, lit a cigar and pondered. "You moral men give me a lot of trouble. Here you are. PRESBUS GAMEIN THELEI. And very interesting too. That clears up several points."

"What the deuce does it mean?"

"What did you learn at school, Lomas? I've often wondered. It means 'The old man desires to marry.' Yes, I thought so. I told you you had all the facts. You remember Joseph said Isabel had had a classical education. Not like you, Lomas. She's sending the messages. She's caught Joseph. It's opening out. Now tell your priceless post office folk to report the order of the letters in future. I don't want to work cryptograms because you've got a conscience. And send somebody to look into Miss George, of 715 Sand Street, good and quick. I'm going down to Stoke Abbas. They've opened the

barrow. Oh, by the way, what about the snapshots?"

"They enlarged well enough. Nobody here knows the people."

"Not known to the police? Well, well. Get a snap of Miss George. Good-bye."

That evening Mr. Fortune stood on Dragon Hill with Joseph and Isabel. Half a dozen labourers rested on their spades and grinned. The long mound of the barrow was gone. It lay in scattered heaps of grey sand around the cromlech which it had covered, three upright stones supporting one flat. Under that flat stone, as a man might lie under a table, lay a skeleton. Reggie knelt down and took up the skull. "Ah, genuine antique,"—he gave a sigh of relief.

Miss Woodall shuddered. "He looks like a monkey."

"No, I wouldn't say that," said Reggie gently, still intent on the bones.

"I am convinced he was a Phœnician," Mr. Larkin announced.

"Oh lord, no," said Reggie. He was not interested in Mr. Larkin's theory that everything old was Phœnician. He was thinking that this man of the barrow with his long head and his big cheek-bones and his short wide body must have been much like Giles of the hovel on the moor. An ancestor per-

haps: five thousand years ago the family of Giles the broom-maker were kings on the sandhills. But Mr. Larkin went on talking about Phœnicians. . . . "Yes, very interesting," said Reggie wearily, and stood up.

"Poor dead man," Miss Woodall sighed. "He looks so lonely."

"My dear," said Mr. Larkin affectionately. "What pretty thoughts you have." They walked back to Restharrow, and he proved again that the skeleton was Phœnician, and it was most gratifying, and he was going to give it to the British Museum and Reggie was bored.

In that condition he remained for the duration of his visit to Restharrow. When Mr. Larkin was not talking about Phœnicians, or (worse still) reading extracts from his new book on "The Origins of Our World," he was (worst of all) being affectionate with Miss Woodall. A mawkish little man. But there was no mystery about them. The great book was published, the barrow was opened. Mr. Larkin was going to write a pamphlet about it, close it down again, marry Miss Woodall, and take her off to South Africa where he meant to find many more traces of the Phœnicians. Reggie wished them joy, and as soon as he decently could went back to London.

Two days afterwards Lomas found him having

breakfast in his bedroom, a rare thing, a sure sign of depression. "My dear fellow, are you ill?"

"Yes, very ill. Go away. I don't like you. You look distressin'ly cheerful, and it's very bad for me."

"There's been another message. TUCHEAPELTHE."

"Don't gargle, spell it," said Mr. Fortune peevishly. "Yes, TUCHE APELTHE. Two words. 'Fortune has gone away.' Very kind of her to notice it."

Lomas smiled. "So Isabel wanted Miss George to know Mr. Fortune had gone away. That's interesting. And we've got something about Miss George, Reginald. She isn't a woman. Oh no. She's a middle-aged man, who calls himself George Raymond. He don't live at 715 Sand Street. That's a little shop where they take in letters to be called for. George Raymond has lodgings the other end of the town, and lives very quiet. My fellows have a notion he's American."

"Fortune has gone away," Reggie murmured. "I wonder if Fortune ought to have stayed. No. Nothing would happen with me in the house. I wonder if anything will happen."

"What, are you giving up the case?" Lomas laughed.

"No. There's a case all right. But I don't know whether we'll ever get it. Joseph and Isabel

are going to marry, and be off to South Africa."

Lomas was much amused. "And that's the end of it all! My poor Reginald! What a climax! Mr. Fortune's own particular mystery. All orange blossoms and wedding cake."

"Yes. With Miss George as best man. I hope your fellows are looking sharp after Miss George."

"He's giving no trouble. They won't miss him. We've got a photograph too. Nobody knows him, but we'll have it enlarged."

"We'll watch him."

"Oh, certainly: anything to oblige. Have they asked you to the wedding, Reginald? You really ought to send them a present."

Lomas says that Reggie then snarled.

Two weeks passed. Reggie received an angry letter from Mr. Larkin stating that the British Museum had refused the skeleton, and he was replacing it in the barrow and publishing the full facts to inform the public of the blind prejudice of the official world against his work. He was leaving immediately for South Africa, where he had no doubt of obtaining conclusive proof of the theory of the Phœnician origin of all civilization. Mrs. Larkin sent Mr. Fortune kind thoughts and best wishes.

Mr. Fortune moved uneasily in his chair. "And they lived happily ever after," said Mr. Fortune.

"Kind thoughts and best wishes. Dear Isabel." He rang up Lomas to ask how Miss George was getting on.

"Many thanks for kind inquiries," said the voice of Lomas. "Nothing doing. Not by George. He lives the life of a maiden lady. What did you say?"

"I said damn," said Mr. Fortune.

That evening came a letter from Sergeant Underwood. He was plaintive. He thought Mr. Fortune ought to know there seemed nothing more to do at Stoke Abbas. The barrow was being covered up. The servants were leaving Restharrow. Mr. Larkin and Miss Woodall were going to be married at the registry office to-morrow, and the next day sailing from Southampton. Mr. Fortune spent a restless night.

He was fretting in the library of his dreariest club next morning when the telephone called him to Scotland Yard. Lomas was in conference with Superintendent Bell. Lomas was brisk and brusque. "They've lost George Raymond, Fortune. He left Bournemouth this morning with a suit-case. He went to Southampton, put it in the cloakroom, went into one of the big shops and hasn't been seen since. When they found they'd lost him they went back to the station. His suit-case was gone."

"Well, well," said Mr. Fortune. "You have been and gone and done it, Lomas." But he smiled.

"What do you want us to do now?"

"Oh, you might watch the Cape boat. Make sure G. Raymond isn't on the Cape boat when she sails. If you can."

"I've arranged for all that. Anything else?"

"You might give me a time-table," said Mr. Fortune. "I'm going down to the long barrow."

"Good Gad!" said Lomas.

As darkness fell on the moors that night, Mr. Fortune and Superintendent Bell stopped a hired car a mile away from Stoke Abbas and walked on through the shadows. When they came near the shrubberies of Restharrow a voice spoke softly from behind a clump of gorse. "Got your wire, sir. All clear here. They were married this morning. Both in the house now. Servants all gone. No one else been here."

Reggie sat down beside Sergeant Underwood. "Seen anyone strange about?"

"I did fancy I saw some one going up towards the barrow a while ago."

"Work up that way quietly. Don't show yourself."

Sergeant Underwood vanished into the night. Bell and Reggie sat waiting while the stars grew dim in a black sky. The door of Restharrow opened, and a bar of light shot out. They heard voices. "A beautiful night," said Mr. Larkin. "The most beau-

tiful night that ever happened," said Mrs. Larkin. They came out. "Let us go up to the dear old barrow," she said. "I shall always love it, you know. It brought us together, my dearest."

"My dear child," Mr. Larkin chirped. "You are full of pretty thoughts."

They walked on arm in arm.

A long way behind, Reggie and Superintendent Bell followed.

When they came to the crest of the hill, where the turned sand was white in the gloom, "Dear place," said Mrs. Larkin. "How sweet it is here. I think that old Phœnician was lucky, don't you, Joseph dearest?"

A man rose up behind Joseph dearest and grasped his head. There was no struggle, no noise, a little swaying, a little scuffle of feet in the sand and Joseph was laid on his back and Isabel knelt beside him. The other man turned aside. There was the sound of a spade. Then Sergeant Underwood arrived on his back. They went down together. Bell charged up the hill to catch Mrs. Larkin as she rushed to help. But Underwood already had his man handcuffed and jerked him on to his feet.

Reggie came at his leisure and took a pad of cottonwool from Mr. Larkin's face. "Who is your friend with the chloroform, Mrs. Larkin?" he said gently.

"You devil," she panted. "Don't say a word, George."

"Oh, yes, I know he's George," said Reggie, and flashed a torch on the man.

Sergeant Underwood gasped. Sergeant Underwood stared from the man in handcuffs to the man on the ground. "Good Lord! Which have I got, sir?" For the man who stood was of the same small plump size as Mr. Larkin, grey-haired, clean-shaven too, dressed in the like dark clothes.

"Yes, a good make up. That was necessary, wasn't it, Mrs. Larkin? Well, we'd better get the real Mr. Larkin to hospital." He whistled across the night and flashed his torch and the hired car surged up to the foot of the hill. Mr. Larkin was carried to it, it bore him and Reggie away and behind them Mrs. Larkin and George, handcuffed wrist to wrist, tramped long miles to a police station.

A little man lying in the heather on the hill watched them go. "Old Dragon hath taken her," he chuckled. "Giles knew he would have her," and he capered home to his hut on the moor.

Superintendent Bell coming into the coffee-room of an inn at Wimborne next morning saw Mr. Fortune dealing heartily with grilled salmon. "You had a bad night, sir," he said with sympathy.

"Yes. Poor Joseph was very upset. Spiritually and physically. Can you wonder? It's dishearten-

ing to a husband when his wife attempts murder on the wedding night. Destroys confidence."

"Confidence! They're a pair of beauties, the woman and this chap George. I suppose they were going to bury poor Larkin alive."

"Yes. Yes. He wouldn't have been very lively, of course."

"I should say not. What do you think that fellow had on him, sir?"

"Well, chloroform, of course. A pistol, I suppose. Probably some vitriol."

"That's it." Superintendent Bell gazed at him with reverent admiration. "It's wonderful how you know men, Mr. Fortune."

Mr. Fortune smiled and passed Bell his plate of nectarines. "I knew they'd think of everything. That's their weakness. Just a little too careful. But it's a beautiful plan. Grave all ready, nice light soil, spades handy, chloroform the old man, pour vitriol over him, bury him. Not likely anyone would open that barrow again in a century. If they did, only an unknown corpse inside. Nobody missing. No chance anybody would think the corpse was Mr. Larkin who sailed for South Africa alive and kicking. And George and Isabel are Mr. and Mrs. Larkin and live happy ever after on the Larkin fortune. If only she hadn't taken such pains about a grave, if only she hadn't bothered about

Giles, if only they hadn't been so clever with their secret messages, they'd have brought it off. Poor old Joseph, though. He's very cut up. He fears Isabel never really loved him. But he don't want to give evidence against her, poor old thing."

"I don't wonder," said Bell. "He'll look a proper fool in the witness-box."

"Yes. Yes. Not a wise old boy. But human, Bell, quite human."

There was a sprightly noise without. Lomas came tripping in and on the heels of Lomas a solid man with the face of a Roman emperor. "Reginald, my dear fellow, all my congratulations," Lomas chuckled. "You told me so. You really did. Splendid case. This is Mr. Bingham Jackson of the American service."

"I want to know you, sir," said Mr. Bingham Jackson magisterially. "This is right good work. We wanted those two and we wanted 'em bad."

"When Mr. Jackson saw your photographs of George and Isabel he called for champagne," Lomas chuckled.

"Yes. I thought somebody ought to know them," said Mr. Fortune. "I thought they weren't new to the business."

"No, sir." Mr. Jackson nodded impressively. "Not new. Isabel and George Stultz are American citizens of some reputation. We shall be right glad

to have them back. They eliminated Mrs. Stanton Johnson of Philadelphia and got off with her collection of antique jewels. They used morphia and a cellar then. One of our best crimes."

"This is going to hush up Joseph's trouble," said Mr. Fortune with satisfaction. "You'll claim their extradition for murder?"

"Sure thing. We didn't get in on our case early like you. They brought the murder off on our side. You always had 'em on a string. But I want to say, Mr. Fortune, I do admire your work. You have flair."

"Not nice people, you know," said Reggie dreamily. "I get nerves when people aren't nice and ordinary."

"Some nerves," said Mr. Jackson.

TRIAL VI

THE PROFITEERS

MR. FORTUNE climbed heavily from the platform of Lausanne into the Paris express. He had just finished a dinner of ceremony constructed by a Swiss chef. A compartment containing couchettes for three was reserved for him. "Yes. I shall want 'em all," he groaned, and sat down upon one and unbuttoned his waistcoat. The usual noise of Lausanne station worked up to its usual frantic finale. "I feel as if all that was happening inside me," said Mr. Fortune sadly.

His host, the Lithuanian millionaire, Baron Lampe, rushed in, thrust upon him a mass of newspapers and novels, shook his hands violently and darted out again to a fanfare of bells, whistles and all kinds of music. The train groaned and clattered and moved.

"Praise God!" said Mr. Fortune, and tried to do deep-breathing exercises. His success in proving the Baron's daughter innocent of the assault on the abominable Roumanian fiddler had roused Baron Lampe to dreadful hospitality.

Mr. Fortune obtained a bottle of Vichy water and sipped it and looked with dull eyes at the mass of literature. Not till the train had laboured up to Pontarlier and the French custom officers had looked into his dressing-case and gone did he feel well enough to read.

The train gathered speed, and cool mountain air brought to him the scent of pines. He got into his pyjamas and lay down with a Paris paper. Among its strange English news he found something headed "A Mysterious Death. Enigma of a War Millionaire." What followed was a French journalist's attempt to make a short story of the report of an English inquest. Sir Douty, Chevalier of the British Empire, became rich as Crœsus in the War. Then be bought the Château de Douty, the home of his ancestors. Before ever he lived in it he was found dead in the park. The earth from which his family grew, it received him and killed him.

Sir Douty had never been ill, strong as Hercules, all his friends say. No sign of an attack upon him, no violence. But he lay dead. What then? The doctors talk of shock, of a paralysis of the nerves. Anyhow he is dead, this Crœsus of the War. A blow of fate!

"Why can't our papers write like that?" Mr. Fortune smiled and turned over and went to sleep.

He stayed in Paris to restore the self-respect of his digestion. The enigma of that improbable Englishman, Sir Douty of the Château de Douty, was forgotten with the other queer dreams of the night in the train.

The morning after he came back to London Superintendent Bell rang up from Scotland Yard to ask if he was at home. "My body is at home, Bell," said Mr. Fortune sadly. "My soul is in the Bois de Boulogne. Which did you want?" Superintendent Bell would come round at once.

"Good morning, sir. You made a wonderful thing of that Swiss affair. You're looking very well, Mr. Fortune."

"Bright and beautiful as ever, Bell. But why this soft soap?"

Superintendent Bell smiled. "Well, sir, I am glad to see you, and that's a fact. There's a queer little case away in Lancashire. Maybe it isn't anything. But they've called us in, and I don't see my way. The jury made it natural death."

Mr. Fortune sat up in his chair. "Oh my aunt!" he said. "Sir Douty of the Château de Douty!"

"I don't know anything about a château, sir. He wasn't a Frenchman. But you've got the name all right. Sir John Douty, K.B.E., that's the man."

"And who was Sir Douty, Chevalier of the British Empire?"

"What you might call a profiteer. He came of a very old Lancashire family, they say, but he was a workhouse boy. When the War began he was a cotton broker in Liverpool. Small business and rather shady. He did well out of the cotton shortage in the War. He made a lot more buying and selling cotton mills in the boom after the War. They say his estate will work out at a couple of million. When he'd got his pile and his title, he looked about for a country place, and he took it into his head to buy the old family home."

"Restoring the ancient glories of the Doutys."

"That's the idea, sir. So he bought Mimms Hall. It's a queer place, an hour out of Manchester, stuck in the middle of collieries. It's old enough, and has a bit of a scrubby park. But you wouldn't think a rich man would want it for a country house. It's been empty this long time. The Doutys went broke and went under two hundred years ago. It passed through a lot of hands. Nowadays nobody wants to live in it. Last owner an old lady in Cheltenham. She couldn't let and couldn't sell till Sir John Douty snapped at it. They say he paid through the nose, which isn't like him, and he spent thousands doing it up."

"I suppose he was the heir of the old family?"

"I suppose he thought he was, or wanted people to think he was. You get that kind of swank, sir.

Oh, it must have been the family name made him buy it. The place is no sort of catch. Well, sir, he never lived in it after all. The builders made a long job and he was always running over to see how they were getting on, and one day he was found dead in the park. No mess, no sign of violence, just dead. They were a bit quick with the inquest. The local doctor did the post-mortem. He said Sir John Douty died from shock, syncope, paralysis of the nerves, kind of stroke. The verdict was death from natural causes."

"Yes. Where do we come in, Bell?"

"Well, sir, I ask you! Healthy man of sixty goes walking in a park and dies quick and sudden from shock. Is it likely?"

"It could happen," said Mr. Fortune slowly. "Who was the doctor?"

"Dr. Enoch Ashton."

Mr. Fortune reached for a medical directory. "Yes. Oldish man. Quite good qualifications. Why, don't you believe Dr. Enoch Ashton?"

Superintendent Bell coughed. "Well, sir, the local police thought it was rather queer. He was known in Lancashire, you see, was John Douty."

"And they didn't love him?"

"No, I haven't heard of anybody who loved him. Not a nice man, sir. That's one of the things that made them suspicious. There's been a lot of talk.

The police heard some of it and began to look about. And they sent it up to us."

"And what's it worth, Bell?"

"Ah, that's what I want to know." Superintendent Bell rubbed his nose. "First thing I said to myself when I read the inquest was, 'Who gets his money?' Well, it's his son, John Douty junior. That hit 'em up in Lancashire. They say the son is a chip of the old block, all out for money, lives hard and fast. He was partner with his father, but they quarrelled like sin. And the son gets a million or two by the father's death. But then the son was in London the day Sir John died. So whatever was done in the park, he didn't do it."

"If you believe the doctor, nothing was done."

Superintendent Bell leaned forward. "They're none so sure of the doctor, sir. He's always been straight, most respectable and all that. But he's got a pretty daughter, and old Sir John was rather a lad. I was telling you, Sir John was often about Mimms Hall. Well, he saw Rachel Ashton and he went after her. The doctor caught him one day and told him off proper. They've got evidence of that. But it would take something more than a row to stop the old man when he was after a girl. They think maybe the doctor caught him at it again and did him in."

"How?" said Mr. Fortune.

"That's what I'm asking you, sir. How many ways can a man die of shock?"

"Fatal shock is generally caused by violence. But you say there wasn't any violence. Who found the body?"

"Builders' men going home. The local constable saw it as it lay—all in a heap, no sign of a blow or a struggle. Can't you have shock from some sort of row, sir?"

"From mental or emotional stress? Yes. It can happen. But your Sir John Douty don't sound highly mental or emotional."

"He was not!" the superintendent agreed. "A lusty old fellow, hard as nails. What do you think of it, sir? Mr. Lomas, he says we're wasting our time, the local police are making mares' nests for us."

"Yes, it could be," Mr. Fortune smiled. "I feel I have a very open mind, Bell. There might have been disease. There might have been poison. The doctor is the unknown quantity. Did Dr. Ashton tell the truth? Did he know the truth?"

"Do you want the body dug up, sir?"

"You're very eager, Bell."

"I don't like it, sir. It looks nasty to me."

"I wonder," Mr. Fortune murmured. "Not one of our simple cases. A lot of dark background. And something rather queer in the dark. No, I

don't much like it, Bell." He started up and walked to the window and opened it wider. "I wonder. No, I wouldn't dig up the body. Don't alarm Dr. Enoch Ashton just yet. Send me a full report of what he said at the inquest."

The Mimms Hall case is considered by Superintendent Bell and others to be one of Mr. Fortune's best. That is not his opinon. He complains that he never knew what was going to happen next. The next thing which did happen was Dr. Enoch Ashton.

Dr. Ashton turned up in Wimpole Street at the unseemly hour of 9 p.m. Reggie Fortune was still at the dinner-table, was looking wistfully at the last meringue when Dr. Ashton's card was set before him. He meditated over it through the fragrance of two cups of coffee and sighed and went to his consulting-room.

Dr. Ashton was a large man, like Punch in the face, but with white whiskers.

"Very good of you to see me, Mr. Fortune. It's rather pressing and I want to consult the highest authority. I don't know if you've heard of Sir John Douty's death?"

"Yes, I read the papers." Mr. Fortune looked dreamily at the sharp red face.

"That's what's brought me here. I want your advice."

"Yes. One moment. It's just possible I may

have to consider the Douty case officially. Advise the police, you know. Do you think you had better say anything to me?"

"If it's in your hands I'm satisfied," said Dr. Ashton heartily. "Sir Lawson Hunter told me to put myself in your hands."

"Sir Lawson Hunter! Well, you couldn't have a better opinion. So you want to put all the facts before me?"

"Everything," said Dr. Ashton.

Reggie Fortune rose and gave him a cigar and lit one himself, then sighed relief and sank down into his chair. "And what did Sir Lawson Hunter think of Douty's death?"

"He said it was a damned queer case."

"That was rather my notion," Reggie murmured.

"So it is. But it's clear as daylight, Mr. Fortune. You read my evidence at the inquest? Well, that was absolutely accurate. There was no wound, no bruise, no sign of violence. I could find no disease. He was a man of sixty and he'd lived freely, some traces of drink and profligacy, but nothing dangerous. His heart was sound. But there was very little blood in heart or brain. It had all gone down to the big veins."

"No blood in the heart or nerve centres," Reggie murmured. "No injury, and the man was dead!"

"If that isn't death from shock, what is it?"

"You found nothing else abnormal?"

Dr. Ashton knit his brows. "Well, no. The surface veins were congested, of course. Just a faint red pattern in parts of the body. It looked like a drawing of trees in red."

"Good Lord!" Reggie sat up. "I've seen that in a man who had been struck by lightning. Heat stroke, too."

"But there was no lightning," Dr. Ashton laughed impatiently. "It was a fine, cold April day."

"I know. And he went a walk on that fine, cold day and he tumbled down dead. Well, well."

"You have all the facts that I had. What would you have said was the cause of death, Mr. Fortune?"

"Oh, shock—shock. But what shocked him?"

"That's not my business. You can't tell that from a post-mortem."

"No. And you haven't made a guess, Dr. Ashton?"

Dr. Ashton flushed. "Ah, now you're coming to it," he said. "I suppose the police have been talking to you, Mr. Fortune. It's quite true I had words with Sir John Douty. The fellow pestered my daughter and I warned him off. That was a week before he died. I didn't see the man from that time till they brought me to his dead body. But because the local police heard of that row they've been prying round my house, questioning my servants, badg-

ering me to account for all my movements on the day of the death, cross-examining me about what I really found in the body. It's a damnable business, Mr. Fortune. I've nothing to hide and I've told you everything. I want to know if you're satisfied?"

"I see no reason to doubt anything you've said, Dr. Ashton."

"Thanks," the doctor said dubiously. "I suppose that's all I could expect. I wish you could tell me these maddening inquiries would stop."

"I don't control the police, you know."

"You mean they'll go on hunting for evidence?"

"It is possible, Dr. Ashton."

"Then I wish you'd exhume the body and see for yourself."

"It's a serious thing to dig up a corpse."

"Anything's better than this suspicion," Dr. Ashton cried.

"Yes. Very natural you should say so. I'll remember your wish." Dr. Ashton was shown out into the night, and Reggie stood watching him stride away. "I wonder," he said. "Oh lord, it is dark."

He is accustomed to make up his mind quickly. In the Mimms Hall case—and this much distressed him—he had great difficulty in making it up about anything. Some days went by before he said a word

to Scotland Yard. Then the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department rang him up.

"Are you a ghost, Fortune?" said the telephone.

"I hadn't noticed it. Why?"

"Because you don't speak till you're spoken to. Come and speak to me. I want comfort."

The Hon. Sidney Lomas received Mr. Fortune with gentle irony. He supposed that Fortune had heard certain rumours of the existence of the Criminal Investigation Department. They were patient modest people, they didn't want to worry anybody, but they did like to have a kind word sometimes.

"What's the matter now? Has he come to life again?" said Mr. Fortune sharply.

Lomas put up his eyeglass. "You refer to Sir John Douty, K.B.E.?"

"Ah, you haven't forgotten our little troubles. How nice of you! No, our K.B.E. hasn't come to life. But he isn't at all quiet in his grave. Just look at this—and this."

He gave to Mr. Fortune two letters. In the first, which was long and used very beautiful language, the chief of the local police submitted that in view of the many suspicious circumstances about the death of Sir John Douty his body should be exhumed and examined by medical experts. In the second, which was short and forcible but without any beauty, the son of the late Sir John Douty ob-

jected to the attempts of the police to make trouble about his father's death. He had heard with surprise and disgust that it was proposed to dig up the body. He wished to protest against this as a stupid outrage, an insult to the family.

"Temper—or funk?" Lomas smiled.

"Well, you wouldn't expect a son to like his father exhumed," said Reggie. "He's natural enough."

"Is he? He's been speeding up the redecoration of Mimms Hall. He's going to give a housewarming party as soon as he can get the workmen out of the place. That's how he feels about his father's death."

"Rather a thick skin," Reggie agreed.

"Thick as a pig's. He is a pig in many ways, I hear."

"It seems to run in the family."

"Yes, the old man wasn't what you'd call a Christian gentleman. But he had a right to die a natural death. That's our trouble. Did he?"

Reggie fidgeted. "I have no reason to say he didn't, Lomas."

"Thank Heaven! I don't mind owning that I saw nothing in the case. If the fellow hadn't been a millionaire, nobody would have bothered about him. One law for the rich and another for the poor. Because the old ruffian was beastly wealthy, it's suspicious that he doesn't die in his bed with a

specialist or two to kill him decently. I wasn't losing much sleep over Sir John Douty. But this shakes me." He tapped the letter of John Douty junior. "When a son flies off the handle at a proposal to exhume his father, I begin to sit up and take notice."

Reggie Fortune wriggled again. "What's the theory?" he groaned. "The only sound reason for digging up the body is that we don't believe in Dr. Ashton. But you want to dig it up because you don't like the son and heir. What is the theory, Lomas? That Dr. Ashton is a silly ass or that he is in collusion with the son?"

"He might be both," Lomas smiled.

"Oh my head!" said Mr. Fortune, and held it. "You're full of ideas, Lomas. Try another. Dr. Ashton is very anxious the body should be exhumed."

"Good Gad!"

"Just so. He came to me, very lucid and rational, and said people were being nasty to him, so would I dig up the body please and have a look at it myself. Now what's the theory, Lomas?"

"Did you say lucid, Reginald? And rational?" Lomas sighed. "That isn't how he strikes me. I gather you liked Dr. Enoch Ashton."

"No. I wouldn't say that. A little too correct. A little too nervous about his reputation. But I

didn't think he was bluffing. He was quite sure I shouldn't find anything he hadn't found."

"Do you feel sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything. There's a lot of dark background. Suppose it was shock. Why did the man choose to have his shock at Mimms Hall? He was generally somewhere else. What sort of thing would shock a tough old profiteer? It must have been something rather recherché."

"And if it wasn't shock it might have been anything?"

"Anything—natural or unnatural. But Dr. Ashton must have done some bold lying."

"Oh, we'd better dig up the body," Lomas said, and he smiled. "A great chance for you, Reginald."

"Why not do a little work yourself?" said Mr. Fortune with disgust. "Apply the trained intelligence of the detective. See if you can find out something about the past of the Doutys."

"I've got it all from the cradle to the grave." Lomas tapped a pile of paper. "The Lancashire police have worked at the case like beavers, confound them. And there's nothing in all their stuff but that the man had a row with Dr. Ashton."

'They looked for what they expected and they found it. How like a policeman! Send Bell down. He has an open mind."

So Superintendent Bell went to Lancashire and the application for an exhumation order went to the Home Secretary and Mr. Fortune went to look at his May tulips.

Upon the third day a trunk call from Scotland Yard brought him out of the garden above the river. He was told that John Douty junior had been found dead in his room at Mimms Hall. Mr. Douty had given his house-warming party. Half a dozen men were at Mimms Hall. They kept it up late. Mr. Douty did not come down in the morning. He did not answer when they called him. His door was locked. They broke it open. His body was quite cold.

Taking his life and his licence in his hands, Reggie Fortune's chauffeur brought the car to Euston in time for the noon express. Pale and dreamy, like a waking child, Reggie Forutne got out of the restaurant car in Manchester. It was looking its best. The streets were dry. The sun could be seen. But its beauties did not cheer Mr. Fortune. An ancient taxi wheezed away with him through miles of little grim houses, and he bounced from side to side in listless melancholy. He came out of the town into country devastated by tall chimneys, gaunt winding-engines, and heaps of dingy rubble. But the river valley might have been beautiful before the water was black. He caught a glimpse of red

rock over the river and hills rose before him, flat-bosomed hills all much alike.

The taxi groaned and grated and swung away by a terribly new lodge of yellow brick into a park where among old and dying timber a host of saplings had been planted. Mr. Fortune put his hand to his eyes. An Elizabethan manor house stood up against him, red and raw. It was a place of pleasant design, but it had been scraped and pointed and restored till it looked like a mass of meat.

"No wonder he died of shock," Mr. Fortune groaned. The taxi stopped. Mr. Fortune sat still, gazing at the glaring house.

Superintendent Bell came to the door. "Glad you've come, sir. Will you see the body at once?"

"Yes—yes. Nothing inside can be worse than the outside."

There are moments when Superintendent Bell does not understand Mr. Fortune. "Queer old place, sir. But it's a very queer business," he protested. "This way."

The room in which John Douty lay dead was large and of graceful proportions. It had been treated less brutally than the outside. The coat-of-arms on the ceiling was glittering with new paint; the oak panelling had been polished till it shone. But the room itself was still pleasant. The outrage there was the furniture, which flaunted red and gold

lacquer. On the vast bed, on a quilt where crimson storks sported in wistaria, was John Douty's body.

"Dr. Ashton's seen him, sir. But he wouldn't touch him except to make sure he was dead. He said he had no idea how he died."

"Somebody's touched him," Reggie frowned. "He wasn't found like this."

"No, sir. When they broke the door in they found him over there in the corner. Sort of kneeling in a heap, they say. As if he died saying his prayers. But the bed had been slept in and the lights were out."

Reggie looked down at the dead face. "God help us!" he murmured, uncommon words for him. "I shouldn't have said this man prayed much." For the face, though it was very pale, was cruel and coarse, the face of a man who let his appetites rule him, and had some evil appetites.

"No, sir," Bell agreed gravely. "I can't think so. Worse than his father, that's his reputation. And no one has a good word to say for the old man."

"On his knees—in the corner—and he'd been in bed," Reggie murmured, and bent over the body. "A queer way to die." He covered the body again and stood up and frowned at it.

"What do you say, sir?" Bell asked at last.

"I say nothing."

"Nothing?" Bell was startled. "Beg pardon, sir,

but did you see that?" He lifted the dead hand. Round the wrist was a purple line. "Same on the other too."

"Thank you. I can see," said Mr. Fortune with unwonted acidity.

"Beg pardon, sir. I thought it might have been a struggle. Somebody gripped him."

"Held his wrists so tight that he died? Unusual cause of death. And those lines weren't made by anybody's hands. Did somebody tie his wrists so tight it killed him? Also unusual. Tie him so he couldn't struggle and kill him some way that left no other marks? That isn't common, either. And then your somebody went out leaving the door locked on the inside. Ingenious fellow!"

"Well, sir, we've only the word of these fellows that found him the key was on the inside."

Mr. Fortune stared at him. "That is so. Something possible at last. Even reasonable. I beg your pardon, Bell. My mind isn't working. We don't know anything but what we've been told. Very depressing."

He shrugged his shoulders and shivered and walked to the window.

"Nobody could have got in that way, sir. Nobody but a small child," said Bell. For the big bow window opened only in little casements.

Reggie looked out at the new gravel of the drive

and the new patchwork turf and the new flower-beds full of geraniums and calceolarias, and shuddered and wandered away to the corner where the dead man had been found. There was no mark on the carpet, none on the polished panelling.

"Very depressing!" he murmured, and started round. "I can't do anything here!" he said sharply. "Have the body taken somewhere I can examine it. Come on."

"I'll tell Inspector Barton. He's in charge here, sir." Bell opened the door.

But Reggie stopped on the threshold. "I want that door sealed," he said.

The superintendent pointed to a policeman in a chair on the landing. "When the body's gone, seal the door!" Reggie said sharply. "Now, what about these fellows who told the tale?"

Inspector Barton was a little man who had the speech of Manchester and a pugnacious self-confidence. He had established himself in the morning-room, and was tapping out his report on a little typewriter, a page a minute.

"Hallo, doctor, done your job?" His fingers paused a moment. "What's it come to?"

Superintendent Bell, scandalized at this manner of dealing with his Mr. Fortune, said they couldn't take the matter like that and the inspector would kindly give instructions to remove the body to a mortuary

where a complete investigation could be made, and then have the room sealed up. The inspector bounced out of his chair and did so, and the heavy tread of constabulary made Mimms Hall creak. The inspector came back again. "Don't want to commit yourself, doctor?" he grinned, and tapped away at his typewriter. "Safety first, eh? That's all right. I've got some things myself want sifting. But I reckon we'll do best working together. Have you got any ideas you could tell me without prejudice?" The typewriter clacked on.

"I could tell you to stop that noise," said Mr. Fortune sadly.

"Just drop that, Barton!" Bell frowned. "Mr. Fortune wants your attention. Who were these fellows in the house?"

Inspector Barton bore no malice. This seemed to be the way to treat him. He reeled off a list and short biographies of the house party. They were six. Four of them business friends of John Douty, men of his own sort, well known, money to burn, hard cases all. Nothing against them. Inspector Barton winked. They wouldn't stick at a trifle in business, sport, or with women. But plain crime wasn't in their way. Much too shrewd.

"It isn't a plain crime," said Bell.

"No. No. A lot of background," Reggie mur-

mured. "Any background to these fellows, inspector?"

"I tell you we know all about 'em. Nothing queer. Nothing you don't expect with that kind of sportsman. I reckon you can rule them out."

"How did they take the death?"

"Pretty tough, they are. More angry than sorry, if you know what I mean. Seemed to think it was a shabby trick of Douty to bring them out here so he could die with them in the house. They cleared off quick. We know where to find 'em if we want 'em. I've got their evidence. It don't amount to anything. Big dinner last night. Douty did 'em proud. They kept it up late. Plenty of liquor going. And they don't remember any more till the morning."

"That's four out of six. What about the other two?" said Reggie.

"Ah, now you're getting warmer, doctor. They were employees. There was Douty's secretary, Sandbach, shrivelled old stick, come down in the world. He had a big business of his own once. Broke in the War. The Doutys bought it for a song. Young Douty took him on, partly because he knows the ropes, partly to make a butt of him. He liked to have someone about him to bully, did Douty. And then there was Kiderlin, a youngish fellow, a chemist the Doutys used as a technical ex-

pert. He was in trouble over a woman; remember the St. Helens child murder? He got clear by the skin of his teeth. His firm chucked him and the Doutys picked him up cheap. No better brains at his job, they say, but decent people wouldn't employ him. The Doutys used him in some of the dirtiest business."

"They were a genial family, the Doutys," said Reggie.

Inspector Barton laughed. "I reckon there's not many crying over 'em." He cocked his eye at Bell. "Wonder if they caught a tartar when they caught Mr. Kiderlin, the chemist."

"Poor devil!" said Reggie. "Kiderlin did some fine work once."

"Oh, before he went under," Inspector Barton grinned.

"Before he went into business," Reggie corrected him. "Poor devil! He gave up research for a factory and a fat salary. Then he went to the dogs. Then he went to the Doutys. Poor devil."

"I didn't take to Mr. Kiderlin myself," Inspector Barton sniffed. "But it's quite right he had no jam with the Doutys. No more than old Sandbach. Well, I was saying, you're getting warm, doctor. This last night here was pretty wet. When they got merry they were ragging Kiderlin and Sandbach. I reckon that's what Douty had the beggars

here for. Made 'em sing, made 'em dance, chivied 'em. There was a lot of noise, the servants say. And then everybody got to bed and the valet found Douty's door locked in the morning."

"Have you got anything more about the valet?" Bell said. "It turns on him to my mind. He's the evidence the door was locked and the key inside."

"You heard him. He sounded straight. He hasn't been long with Douty. I got his last character over the telephone. Quite all right. We'll look him up, of course. But I don't see anything against him. Like to see Mr. Kiderlin, doctor?"

"Yes, let's get that over," said Reggie.

Mr. Kiderlin came, a wisp of a man with a big head and a nervous manner.

"My name's Fortune, Mr. Kiderlin," Reggie said gently. "I want to know if you can help me in this case?"

"Mr. Fortune? I am very glad." A smile passed over the thin, pale lips. "Now that you take the case everything will be done for poor Mr. Douty."

Reggie frowned. "You knew him well, Mr. Kiderlin. I wonder if you can think of any cause for his sudden death?"

"I? There was much in Mr. Douty's life that I did not know. He worked very hard. He was fond of pleasure. Sometimes Nature exacts a penalty. I can only think that. But I am not a doctor."

Reggie Fortune still frowned. "You're a man of science, Mr. Kiderlin. Does nothing else occur to you? I am a doctor, and I'm not satisfied."

"I am only a chemist." Mr. Kiderlin spread out his hands. "It does not help. I know nothing. Mr. Douty was full of vigour last night, and this morning—dead."

"Some ragging last night, wasn't there?" Inspector Barton broke in. "You didn't tell me that. I had to get it from the servants. Douty ragged you."

Mr. Kiderlin laughed nervously. "Ragging? But it was nothing. There was some noise, perhaps. Mr. Douty was jovial, very jovial. It was his way. Did I not tell you? I did not think of it. It happened so often."

"Oh, he often ragged you, did he?" Barton glared.

"When we were in high spirits, there was often good fun." The little man squirmed. "It was very pleasant with Mr. Douty."

"When he rolled you downstairs?" Barton glared.

"No. No. He did not. It was only fun," the little man protested miserably.

"We need not trouble Mr. Kiderlin any further, inspector," said Reggie Fortune with decision, and Mr. Kiderlin bowed his way out.

"Little rat, isn't he?" Barton grinned.

"You know, you'd frighten me, Barton," Bell said.

"Yes. Yes. He was afraid," Reggie murmured. "And that was an ugly case at St. Helens." He sighed. "Well, what about the other man?"

Mr. Sandbach was a tall, bent old fellow, whose clothes and skin hung loosely. He had really nothing to say which he had not told Inspector Barton. And his hands plucked at his knees.

"Mr. Douty hadn't been ill in any way?" Reggie asked.

"No, Mr. Douty had quite good health. A bad head now and then, of course. Mr. Douty was rather fond of pleasure, you see."

"Had he any enemies, Mr. Sandbach?"

Mr. Sandbach was of a sallow grey colour. He could not turn pale. But the grey became greenish. "No, no, indeed! That is to say, he had his disagreements in business. But no personal feeling, none at all." Mr. Sandbach licked his lips. "Everyone liked him."

There was silence for a long minute. Then Reggie said: "Can you tell me anything about this ragging last night?"

"Ragging?" Mr. Sandbach echoed. "But there was nothing. A little fun. We were all very merry. We made a deal of noise. Mr. Douty was in great spirits."

"What did he do to you?" Inspector Barton broke in.

"Do to me? I don't understand. We were all jolly together. Mr. Douty has always treated me as a friend. I was only his secretary, of course. But he was very kind and made things very easy and pleasant."

"Pleasant for Kiderlin too, weren't they?" Barton sneered.

"Why really—of course I couldn't speak for Mr. Kiderlin—I think so. I hope so. I believe Mr. Kiderlin was quite devoted."

Again there was silence.

"Have you told me everything?" Reggie said sadly. "You were all very jolly and happy, then you all went to bed—and John Douty died in the night. You can't add anything to that at all?"

Mr. Sandbach looked at him with a curious earnestness, as though trying to discover what he meant. "No, really, I don't think I can, sir."

"Did you hear anything in the night?" Reggie said quickly.

Mr. Sandbach's hands clenched on his knees. "I —well, I did fancy I heard a sort of a cry. But I'm not sure, you see. I hardly like to mention it."

"Did it wake you?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say. I may only have been dreaming. It's all very vague to me."

"What time was it?"

"Well, there again I couldn't say. Everything was dark, I'm sure. But it's all confused in my mind."

"It seems to be," said Barton. "You'd better be frank with us, Mr. Sandbach."

"But I'm trying to be, indeed I am, sir."

"I shouldn't wonder if you have to try again."

"That'll do, Barton," said Bell, watching his Mr. Fortune.

"I won't keep you any longer now, Mr. Sandbach," Reggie said. "Try to make sure what you really know."

And Mr. Sandbach slunk out, twisting his hands.

"He's in a deadly funk." Barton grinned. "If I'd put him through it I believe I could have made the old liar confess."

"I dare say you could," said Bell. "But this is England."

"Yes. He'd confess something. That's what I was afraid of," said Mr. Fortune. "It might be quite awkward, inspector. The case is complicated enough already."

Inspector Barton stared at him with an expression of contempt. "Well, I'm no medical expert doctor," he began, and there was a tap at the door and a woman came in. She was tall and stately in her plain black. Her dark face and white hair made

a handsome head. She wished to know if the gentlemen were staying the night.

"No thank you," said Reggie with decision. She bowed and went out again. "Who in wonder is that?"

"The housekeeper, Mrs. Herne."

"Herne? Gipsy name."

"I dare say. Lived here thirty years. Housekeeper with old Colonel Stott. Then kind of caretaker. The Doutys kept her on. I was saying, doctor, I'm no medical expert. But I reckon these two fellows, Kiderlin and Sandbach, they know something, and the sooner they confess the better."

"I wonder," Reggie said dreamily. "What a man confesses isn't always what he knows. Good night."

The wheezy taxicab bore Bell and him back to Manchester. "That's a terrible fellow," Mr. Fortune murmured.

"Slap-dash, sir. Very useful under orders. Lot of go. No head for the big stuff."

"He frightens me. I'm all of a dither still. He has a head all right. But no heart, Bell, no heart. He'll be hanging these poor wretches before we know where we are."

"I didn' take to Kiderlin myself," Bell admitted. "Nasty rat of a man. I was sorry for the old fellow, but he was lying, sir."

"I know. I know. Broken men." Reggie

shivered. "A depressin' case, Bell." The cab jolted on through the dark. After a while Mr. Fortune spoke again wearily. "Remains the body. The new body. This body. Make Dr. Ashton come and go over this body with me."

In the morning Dr. Ashton came. When the investigation was over the two men left the mortuary in silence and reached Reggie's rooms in the hotel silent still. Then Reggie took up the telephone and asked for the head waiter and cocktails.

"I beg pardon. Not for me," said Dr. Ashton. "If it's not too much trouble, just a strong cup of tea."

Reggie Fortune was in the middle of a conference about a chicken salad. He faltered, he gazed with horror at Dr. Ashton. "My dear fellow! Oh, my dear fellow," he protested. "Comfort is what we need."

"I couldn't eat anything, thank you. You know, I'm not used to this sort of thing, Mr. Fortune."

"Nor am I," said Reggie, and continued his conference on salad with a few remarks on white wines.

They brought the cocktails and the tea, the cold soup and the chicken, and Dr. Ashton sombrely watched Reggie eat. "You let it worry you rather, don't you?" Reggie slid into an easy chair and lit a cigar.

"I suppose you believe me now," said Dr.

Ashton. "This case is precisely like the other."

"No blood in heart or brain," Reggie murmured. "All the symptoms of shock. But no trace of a wound or a blow. Just what you said you found in the father."

"Oh, you'd better look at the father's body, too."

"I don't suppose you missed anything. This is just what you said. Two incredible deaths from shock. The only difference is the superficial marks —red pattern of veins in the father, such as a lightning or heat stroke produces, purple bands in the son such as might be produced by a cord. But there was no lightning and we can't find any cord. What shocked 'em, doctor?"

Dr. Ashton shook his head. "It's altogether outside my experience, Mr. Fortune. I suppose there is none of the obscure alkaloid poisons which could produce these effects?"

"Nothing that's known. I could do an analysis, of course. I wouldn't know what to look for."

"That's natural death again, then?" Dr. Ashton said. "I am very glad it's you who have to say so and not me."

"I haven't said so. Not yet. Why did they never have a shock till they came to Mimms Hall? What was the new factor that began to work in their lives at Mimms Hall?"

Dr. Ashton lit a cigarette with shaking hands.

"You think it was someone at Mimms? Why, young Douty had hardly ever been at Mimms till the other day. I'd never seen him till I saw him dead."

"But he also came to Mimms Hall to die. Did anyone at Mimms know them before they came?" Dr. Ashton had never heard of it. "Well, well. Are you going back now? I wish you'd show me the place in the park where the old man was found."

The car stopped by the yellow lodge. Dr. Ashton led the way over the coarse, tufted grass to a footpath which crossed the park from the house to the village. Close by it was a circle of green bank. "Just where he was found," the doctor said.

"What is this?"

"They say it's a Roman camp."

"No. No. It might be a ring for bull-baiting. Village close by. Sports of the good old times, I think. And this is where Sir John Douty had his shock?"

"When I was brought to him he lay there in the middle in a heap."

Reggie went delicately. "Here by this stump?" he said.

"Yes, I should say so," Dr. Ashton considered. "I don't remember the stump, but it was hereabouts."

Reggie was down on his hands and knees. "But

it's a very interesting stump," he murmured. It was not the remains of a tree but of a stout piece of timber driven into the ground. The top, nearly level with the ground, was hard and black. "Well, well!" Reggie stood up. "By the way, do you know anything of the servants at the Hall?"

"They're all new except Mrs. Herne. She was housekeeper years ago in the old colonel's time. She stayed on looking after the place when it was empty and Douty took her over with it. Her people have been in Mimms for generations."

"Her people still here?"

"No. There's only herself and her son that I know of. She owns a cottage or two in Mimms. He's in a house agent's firm in Manchester. I believe he put Sir John Douty on to buying the old place."

"Did he though?" Mr. Fortune murmured. "Queer old stump, isn't it?" He looked down at it again; he looked about him; he paced to and fro. "I say, doctor, did it ever occur to you this is rather a ghastly place!"

"God bless my soul!" Dr. Ashton cried. "You startled me, Mr. Fortune. Of course these associations are unpleasant."

"Yes. Yes. Quite so." Mr. Fortune shivered. "Well, I'll go up to the house. Thanks very much."

It seemed to Dr. Ashton that Mr. Fortune was

feeling the strain. He was not surprised. He felt it himself.

Mr. Fortune made for the house at five miles an hour. He found Inspector Barton in conference with Superintendent Bell. "Anything new?"

"Hoping for that from you, doctor," Barton grinned.

"We've been through the servants, sir. One or two points," Bell said.

"Seen Mrs. Herne? Did you ask her if her son had been here lately?"

Barton stared. "Well, now, where did you get that, sir," he said in a humbler tone. "Yes, Jack Herne was here on the night of the death."

"And we didn't get that out of his mother till we had it from the valet," said Bell. "She's close."

"Was he down here on the day of the other death?" said Reggie.

"The Hernes! My God!" said Barton. "Beg pardon, sir, but what put you on to them?"

"Look after it, Bell," said Reggie. "I want you, Barton. I'm going upstairs."

"Yes, sir. I'll go with you myself."

"No. You'll stay outside." Reggie strode out.

"My oath, he's keen," Barton muttered.

"Makes you feel a fool, doesn't he?" Bell smiled.

But the brisk and confident manner of Mr. Fortune did not last long. He broke the seals on the bed-

room door. He said over his shoulder to Barton: "You stay there till I come out. Don't you let anybody in!" He shut the door in Barton's face.

And then he wandered about the big room, fidgeting with a chair here and a curtain there in a vague and futile manner. He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass and stopped and spent some time smoothing his smooth hair and examining the unusual pallor of his chubby face.

The money and the pocket-knife and the keys of John Douty were still on the dressing-table. His clothes lay in a heap on a chair by the bed.

"Yes, he stood here," Reggie murmured. "He went over there and undressed." Reggie followed in the dead man's footsteps. "He got into bed. He put out the light. He lay there in the dark. And then how did the Hernes get at him—and what did they do?"

Reggie sat down on the bed and shivered.

"There would be just the firelight flickering in the dark. Yes, it was a big fire." He glanced at the ashes. "Flames reflected in that shining panelling—just a crackle of burning. That's what he saw, that's what he heard. And then there was a cry in the night. And he was out of bed kneeling in that corner. And he was dead. How did the Hernes get him out of bed, and why did they take him over there?"

Reggie pulled the bedclothes to the ground, ran his hands over the bare bedstead, dragged it out into the middle of the room, and examined the wall and the floor where it had stood. He rose breathless, and wiped the sweat from his face.

"My God, and I'm cold!" he muttered. "I'm cold! This isn't natural. The family of Herne annoys me. How did they get at him? What is the trick of this room?"

He wandered to the fireplace. The vast old chimney had been narrowed for a modern grate, and the new work was solid. He began to feel the panelling, and on a sudden made off to the corner where John Douty died.

"Well, well. This isn't systematic," he protested to himself. "This is futile." But to the corner he went. "Why did I do that?" he said. "What am I doing?" He steadied himself against the panelling. "Yes, it was here!" he cried, and felt cold come over him like a wave.

He stumbled away into the middle of the room, breathing hard and shivering. "Me, too?" he gasped. "I think not!" He made a dash for the door and tumbled into the arms of Inspector Barton.

"Hold up, doctor!" that brisk little man cried. "Feeling queer? Steady, now! What'll I get you? Like a drop of whisky?"

Reggie held him tight. "One moment! You're

nice and natural, inspector," he said unsteadily. "What I really want is a two-foot rule."

Inspector Barton, with the smile of a man who is never found wanting, produced a spring measure.

"Come into the next room. By the way, who slept in the next room? No one? But it's a very nice room. Measure it along the outer wall. Good! Come into the corridor. Measure the length of the two rooms. Now for it!" They went into the room of death, and Reggie bit his lip. "Right up into the corner. Along the outer wall." Reggie kept close to his elbow as he measured. "And that's that!" Reggie murmured. "Come away!"

"Six feet or more short!" Barton cried. "That partition wall is never six feet thick!"

"Six feet of something in the wall." Reggie drew him out. "Seal the room again, Barton!"

He went slowly downstairs to find Superintendent Bell examining Mrs. Herne. She was calmly mistress of herself and the situation.

"Mrs. Herne can't remember whether her son was at Mimms on the day Sir John Douty died, sir," Bell said.

"That's a pity," Reggie murmured.

"He often comes out to see me. He has his motor-bicycle," said Mrs. Herne placidly. "I expect him to-night, sir, if you would like to ask him anything."

"I should. But I dare say you can tell me why it was no one was put in the room next to Mr. Douty's the night he died?"

Mrs. Herne had no difficulty. "We have a number of better rooms, sir. There was no need to use it."

"I suppose it really wasn't used?"

"No, sir! not to my knowledge. I don't understand."

"When was Mr. Douty's used before?"

"I couldn't say, sir. It was the first time Mr. Douty had slept here. The builders have only just finished with the house, you see, and before that it was empty for many years."

"But you were here when it was occupied. I suppose nothing unpleasant ever happened in the room?"

"No, sir; not in my time." The sound of a motor-bicycle was heard. "That is my son, I think." Mrs. Herne went out.

"Hard as nails, sir," Bell said, "and as shrewd as they make 'em. I've got nothing."

Mr. Herne was not as majestic a person as his mother, even darker of face and more plainly of gipsy blood.

"My mother tells you gentlemen want to know if I was out here the day Sir John died," he smiled. "I was. I came over about this time."

"You didn't see him?" Bell asked.

"No; I had tea with mother, and went back before he was found."

"There was one thing I wanted to ask you, Mr. Herne," Reggie murmured. "Why did you suggest to Sir John that he should buy Mimms Hall?"

Mr. Herne smiled. "Well, that's pretty obvious, isn't it, sir? He was a man who could pay a price. My firm had the place on their books. It was good business for me. And between ourselves, Mimms Hall is rather a white elephant nowadays. You'd have to get a man specially interested to buy it. Well, John Douty was the man. His family built the place—and lost it. It seemed natural when he'd made the Douty fortune again he should come back."

"Your family have been in Mimms a long time, haven't they?"

Mr. Herne laughed. "Well, we think so. I believe we were here in the old days when the Doutys owned everything and everybody. But, of course, we were only village people."

"And you wanted to see the old family restored to its ancient home?"

"Oh—well, I don't know." Mr. Herne had lost something of his assurance. "That's sentiment, isn't it? I'm a business man, sir."

"Yes. Yes. It was rather bad business for the Doutys."

"Not my fault, was it?" Mr. Herne said sharply. "I didn't get their money, sir. Mimms Hall wasn't mine."

"No. But the family of Douty hasn't much luck here."

Mr. Herne scowled. "They had a merry time here in the old days."

"Yes. Yes. That's all, Mr. Herne," Reggie murmured.

And when he was gone: "Sly fellow!" Bell said. "But there's nothing to get hold of, sir, is there?"

"He hated 'em well," Reggie said. "What we want now, Bell, is a competent housebreaker. Do you think they have such a thing in Manchester?"

On the next morning two grizzled experts in dealing with old houses inspected the panelling of the best bedroom. They could find no part made to move. They took down a section of it in the corner. What they revealed was another panelled wall, unpolished, with less carving, worm-eaten.

"Well I'm damned!" said Inspector Barton. "Like one of those nests of boxes, this is."

One of the workmen tapped the panelling. "The real goods, guv'nor. The other's sound old stuff, but this is proper antique."

"I know. As old as the house. The other's a good century later," Reggie said.

" 'Ave this down too, guv'nor?" The other man was running his hands over it. " 'Alf a mo'! 'Ere's a 'inge, Bill, I take my oath!" They used tools delicately. A narrow door creaked out of the panelling and opened inwards with a groan. " 'Ere—my Gawd, what's this?" The two workmen shrank back.

The door opened into a little panelled chamber. Bound to a nail in the panelling by a cord hung two bones. Reggie drew a deep breath and went in. There was something on the floor, pieces of dusty fabric, more bones, a skull.

Reggie had the skull in his hand when Bell came to him.

"What is it, sir?"

"A woman. A young woman. Those are the bones of the forearms tied to the wall. I think she was hurt in here. They look like bloodstains on the wall there. Flogged, perhaps. And they shut her up in here in this secret room to die. Nice family, the Doutys."

"When would that be, sir?"

"Before the seventeenth-century panelling was put up. Say about 1670." He bent down, arranging the tumbled bones till the skeleton lay in order

on the floor. "God give you rest," he muttered, and turned away.

Mrs. Herne was making herself busy in the corridor outside the bedroom. Reggie pointed her downstairs. In the morning-room he turned upon her.

"Did you know what we were going to find, Mrs. Herne?"

Mrs. Herne, quite composed, had no idea what he had found.

"In the wall of Mr. Douty's bedroom there was a secret room and in that room a young woman's skeleton."

Mrs. Herne said calmly that it must have been there a long while.

"Two hundred years and more."

Mrs. Herne said that must have been in the days of the old Doutys.

"Yes. Do you know how it came there?"

Mrs. Herne, with a faint smile, said that was before her time.

"You never heard any stories about those days?"

Mrs. Herne said she was no scholar.

It was at this point that Mr. Sandbach broke into the room. He was much agitated.

"Sir—Mr. Fortune—is this true? You've found another body upstairs?"

"It's only a skeleton, Mr. Sandbach," said Mrs.

Herne. For the second and last time in their acquaintance Reggie saw her smile.

"Thank God!" Mr. Sandbach gasped, and sat down heavily.

Mrs. Herne asked if there was anything else, and Reggie waved her away.

"Now, Mr. Sandbach, you didn't tell me all you knew before," Reggie said gravely. "Why do you come to me now?"

"I was afraid," said Mr. Sandbach. "I wasn't sure. I thought, perhaps, poor Kiderlin—now I know. It was the act of God, Mr. Fortune. The vengeance of God. Unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me, you know."

"I don't know," said Reggie. "But I think you know how that skeleton came there."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Sandbach agreed. He seemed quite placid, and even happy. "The story is in a broadside of Queen Anne's time. We had it in our library. A very strange piece. 'Quick into Hell' it was called. In the reign of Charles II John Douty, who was the squire here, tried to get hold of a girl in the village, Sarah Herne. Her mother was a widow. The two of them resisted him. He gave out that the old woman was a witch, and persecuted her, and at last had her burnt for a witch in the village bull-ring. Then he took the girl off to the hall and she was never seen again. It was

believed that he flogged her to death because she resisted him. But soon after John Douty was gored to death by a bull that got loose at a bull-baiting, and his son lost the whole estate at the gaming-table, and died begging at tavern doors. That is the story, sir." Mr. Sandbach smiled. "There has been no Douty at Mimms Hall from then till now."

"You knew all this when John Douty bought the place the other day?"

"I didn't know how much of it was true, Mr. Fortune."

"You didn't try to stop them?"

"Why should I?" Mr. Sandbach said slowly. "Mr. Fortune, if you knew anything of them you wouldn't have tried to stop them."

"Do you mean that you thought something would happen to them here?"

"How could I know? We are all in the hand of God, Mr. Fortune."

"How do you think they died?"

"By the vengeance of God, sir."

When he was gone: "That's all very well, sir," Bell protested. "I believe in God too, but not his God. What killed 'em? The ghosts of women that their ancestors burnt to death and flogged to death? That's too much for me."

"Yet one is found where the mother was burnt

and there are marks on his flesh such as a heat stroke would make, and the other is found where the daughter was tied up for flogging and there are cord marks on his wrists."

"What, Mr. Fortune! You don't believe in ghosts, and ghosts that can kill?"

"Believe? There's more things happen than I believe in, Bell. Can a spirit haunt a place? I don't know. Places where dead people have borne agonies may be somehow affected so that they hurt us. Haven't you ever felt that? What is it that produces shock? Grief sometimes, horror, fear, not anything done to the body. Suppose there is an influence, a force here where these women were tortured. I felt something queer striking at me when I was shut up in that bedroom trying to find evidence against the Hernes.

"The Doutys, brutes like their ancestors, came here where the ghosts, the memories, the power, whatever it is, could get at them. Here, where the Hernes were, knowing it all, thinking of it, hating all the Douty blood. Old Sandbach, too, his mind set on it. And some ghastly pain of the old torture strikes first the father, then the son. You know how a horrible fancy sometimes comes into the mind. It's real and worse for a moment. The father came by the stake where the mother was burnt, and felt himself burning. The son lay where the daughter

had been flogged, dreamed of it, perhaps, and her pain came to him. Shock, shock."

"What the old man called the act of God. That's a pretty awful idea, sir."

"Yes, yes. Not much mercy for them, was there, in the end?"

Bell shuddered. "I reckon it's the merciful that get mercy," he said.

"And we're policemen. What's our chance?"

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SEP 17

FEB 3

DEC 11 AU 16 '63

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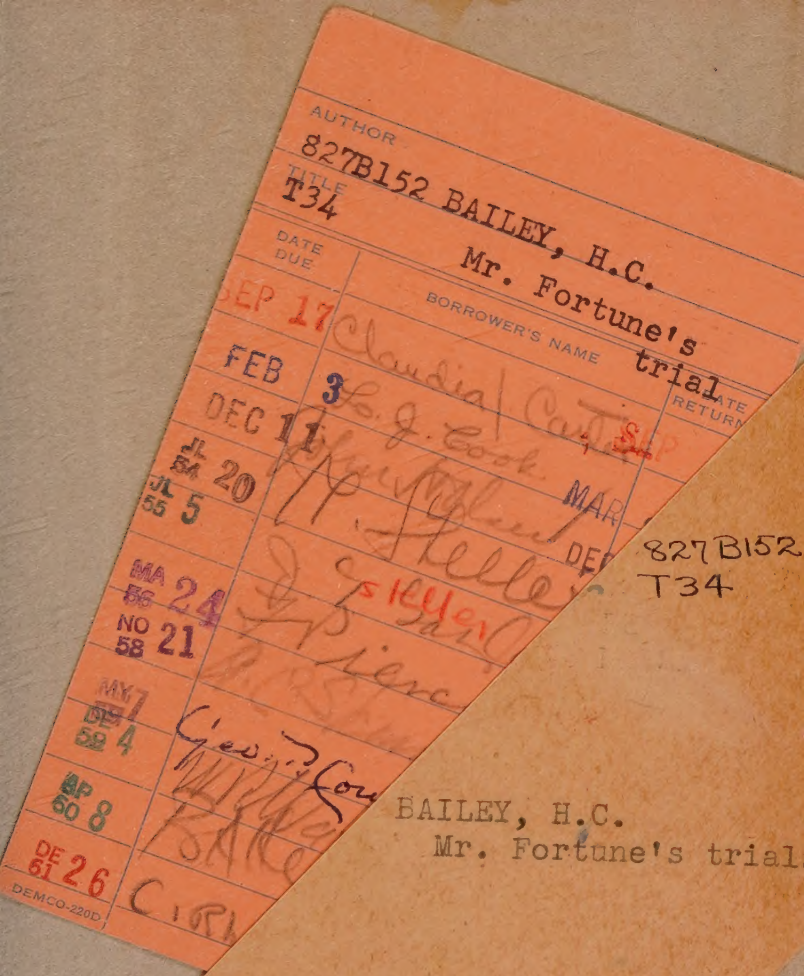

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